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Under the Pomegranate Tree

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Under the Pomegranate Tree

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

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At the back of our house in the village of Tobay, there was a small, windowless room with mud walls and a tin roof. This was Dhaaga’s room. He used to say that when the monsoon rains unleashed their anger, it felt as though the whole village was pelting his roof with small stones. I teased him then, telling him that maybe one day he would do something really bad, and the whole village would stone him to death. He never teased me back. His bony face just took on a dark look, as though what I was saying would come true. As though there was a curse placed on him already. I didn’t know anything at the time. I didn’t know that that room would one day see Dhaaga’s blood spilled across its floor, just as it had seen my mother’s blood twelve summers before Dhaaga ever entered our lives. For it was in that room that I was born.

“It was so hot and so quiet the night you came into our world.” Amma liked to relate the details of that night, because that was the only time she ever gave birth to a child who lived. “Baba tried to help Grandma Ma-ji fan away the mosquitoes – Allah knows there were so many in that room, flying around while I listened to Bindi’s tail thump the ground in the next room. But, that was where Ma-ji wanted me to give birth to you. It was in the back of the house, so the villagers wouldn’t hear my screams. She kept telling me to chew on my veil and not scream and embarrass Baba. The villagers had seen Ma-ji search for the midwife and Baba run for water
from the well, so they knew it was my time.” Amma always buried her face in her veil as if she
still felt embarrassed that the whole village knew her time had come. “They quietly waited on
their rooftops and in their courtyards. Balu Taya, your father’s big brother, came to the house
and sat with Baba.”

“And then the angels invented a window for me to squeeze through, and I fell onto your
lap?”

I watched her as she lowered her tone, as always ignoring my comments about the
window. “The midwife, fat old Sakina Apa, came toddling along, saying men should sometimes
control their hunger and not make their poor wives’ bellies swell with children. She squatted on
the dirt floor, and I chewed hard on my veil – Ma-ji had rolled the end to make it soft in my
mouth. She kept saying ‘chew, chew, chew,’ and I chewed until you were born.”

“Then I fell onto your lap, and the window closed?”

“Mina, don’t talk about the window in front of Ma-ji or Baba,” Amma said. “Just
remember the angels brought you to me. That’s what my mother told me, and that’s what I’m
telling you, silly girl.”

Amma always ended her story by telling me that when Balu Taya informed the villagers
that Baba was the father of a girl, they raised their hands to Heaven and said, “Whatever Allah
the Almighty Wills,” and quietly went to sleep on their rooftops and in their courtyards.

As a child, I remember peeking into the room where I was born and wondering in which
wall the angels made the window through which I entered the world. If they had made a window,
why hadn’t they made the mosquitoes go away? Why hadn’t they made Amma not feel so much
pain, and why hadn’t they made me into a boy so that Baba could have celebrated?
That room lay empty until Dhaaga entered our lives, several summers after I was born. He was a homeless boy, begging on the streets of Tobay. Amma felt sorry for him and brought him home. He said his father had been a tailor in a neighboring village and had died some time ago. Then he burst into tears and choked on his words, refusing to give out his name, so Amma invented one for him. She said that since his father was a tailor, and the boy was as skinny as a string of cotton thread, a dhaaga, she would call him just that: Dhaaga.

His dust-caked face had tears running down in tiny rivulets, but he stood motionless, as though the breath had been sucked out of him and left him dangling like his namesake, a dhaaga. Amma served him lentils and flatbread, and he ate quietly, squatting on the mud floor of our kitchen. Ma-ji insisted he take a bath afterward and wash his clothes. She gave him Bindi the buffalo’s old, iron bucket and had him fetch water from the well behind our house. Dhaaga did as he was told, never once looking up. He seemed soaked in sadness, as though he carried a heavy burden that weighed him down. I watched him through the small window in our kitchen that overlooked the back of the house where Bindi sat under the shade of the old peepal tree. By the time he opened the door to the small bathroom next to his room, half the water in the bucket had already spilled out. Next time, I thought, if Amma and Ma-ji weren’t looking, I would help him carry that bucket.

I knew Amma and Ma-ji wouldn’t let me talk to him unless it was to tell him to do something for them. Even though he looked around ten or eleven years old, the same age I was then, I knew it wasn’t right to talk to him. Not only was he a boy, he was also our servant. We had kept an older servant boy before from some neighboring village to take care of Bindi, but Ma-ji said she’d caught him drinking Bindi’s milk and then adding water to the little that was left over for us. She had warned him several times and then finally kicked him out of the house. It
was the same story, Ma-ji lamented: every time she hired any help, the boy would eventually start stealing milk or food, and they would have to start looking for someone else.

I think Ma-ji hired and fired the boys easily because she knew Amma and I were there to take care of Bindi. Each time a new boy arrived, Amma and I felt relieved. Then Ma-ji would start complaining about something or the other, and the boy was let go. The other boys had been older, so I kept away from them. But, with Dhaaga, it was different. He was a little shorter than me and had a perpetually frightened look on his face, making anyone who saw him want to take care of him. At least, that’s what I wanted.

From that day he was officially in charge of Bindi the buffalo. Dhaaga awoke at sunrise, milked Bindi and churned butter and fresh cream for us to eat at breakfast. Later on during the day, he collected Bindi’s dark green, pasty dung and mixed it with hay to form large, round patties, which he slapped onto the mud walls of his room to let them dry in the hot sun. We used dried dung for fuel to cook our lunch. Baba said the village Chaudhry, the rich feudal lord, had promised natural gas lines would be set up in the village, but they never were. So, we prayed for Bindi to stay healthy and hearty.

At first, I stayed away from the back of the house where Bindi and Dhaaga lived. Then one day, when Amma and Ma-ji had gone to their rooms for a midday nap, I looked out the kitchen window and saw Dhaaga climb onto Bindi’s back and try to ride her.

“Ma-ji will kill you if she sees!” I half-whispered through the window, hoping Amma or Ma-ji wouldn’t wake up.
He ignored me and rode Bindi out through the back door toward the well. I ran after Dhaaga and couldn’t stop laughing when I saw his skinny body trying to balance on Bindi’s fat back.

“You’re like a bird perched on the fat buffalo!” I cried out.

He swiveled his head around, and for the first time I saw a smile emerge upon his lips. He didn’t say anything but turned Bindi around and brought her back to the peepal tree.

“Ma-jii will kill you if she sees you taking Bindi out of the house like that,” I said, hands planted on my hips.

“She won’t know if you don’t say anything,” he answered in a soft voice.

“I won’t say anything, Dhaaga.” I turned around to go.

“I’ve seen you play marbles,” his voice sounded from behind me. “I used to play all the time.”

“Amma and Ma-jii are still sleeping.” I walked back to him. “I’ll get the marbles for you, and you can play.”

I hurried back to the house to fetch the marbles from our room, careful not to disturb Amma who slept on the charpai next to mine.

He quietly sat by Bindi and started playing. I stood watching, but he didn’t ask me to play.

“You can keep the marbles,” I said, feeling happy to have done something for him. “Baba can always get me more.”

I wondered what would happen if I snuck away to watch Dhaaga play marbles or even ride Bindi. Maybe Amma and Ma-jii would scream and kick Dhaaga out for letting me spend time with him, or maybe they would just tell me not to go back there again. I thought I would
take a chance and see what would happen. I missed not having a friend to play with. I had been so happy when Baba told us that the government had promised to build a girls’ school in Tobay, because it would have given me a chance to make more friends. But, after elections were held, a new government took over. Old promises were forgotten, and new ones took their place, making the chance of a girls’ school ever being established in Tobay seem like a distant dream.

Amma never let me go out to play, because she said the Chaudhry’s thugs were running around, kidnapping young girls when they went out alone and robbing them of their honor. As if that wasn’t enough, she said that at night, the jinn, who lived in the pomegranate tree that grew by the stream near our village, was out looking to marry young girls who wandered around. She said a young girl had been walking near the tree in the early morning hours, and the jinn whisked her away in his chariot. She had never been seen or heard from again. My mother said a girl was safe only in the four walls of her house. If I had listened to her, my fate would have been different.

Maybe because I was so young at the time and didn’t realize how lonely I was, I started sneaking to the back of the house more often than I knew I should have been. I always felt scared that Amma or Ma-ji might find out I was playing with the servant boy, but I still snuck away, if only for a short time. As time went by, my days seemed structured around finding a safe time to spend with my new friend.

Sometimes, Dhaaga would be sleeping in his room or next to Bindi, and I would boldly wake him up. We’d play marbles or hopscotch, and we’d talk, too. He was quiet at first, but then he began sharing his dreams of running away to Lahore to become a police officer. He said that once he was an officer, he would ride his police horse into his village with his Kalashnikov slung on his shoulder, and he would round up all the bad people there and punish them. I asked him
who those bad people were, but he wouldn’t tell me. He just said that he would put them in jail, so that everyone else could be safe.

“I’ll come to Tobay, Mina, once I’m an officer, and you can see me ride my horse,” he said one day. “Nobody in Tobay will believe it’s really me, not even you.”

“By the time you become an officer, I’ll already be married to Manda and have children,” I replied. “You’ll have to ask Manda for permission to meet me.”

“I’ve heard things in the village about your cousin Manda.” Dhaaga’s voice got low, as though suddenly he was scared someone might be listening. “He’s one of the Chaudhry’s thugs.”

“Baba says Manda owns an acre of land, and the Chaudhry’s promised him a buffalo once he marries me,” I said defensively. Baba and Amma would decide when it was time for me to get married, and I knew I should never question that. That’s just how things were done.

“It’s just that I’ve heard things about Manda and his friends.” Dhaaga poured water for Bindi to drink. I could feel him trying to avoid looking at me. “His friends are thieves, Mina, who steal from the villagers, and no one can do anything because they work for the Chaudhry.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I just kept quiet. Manda was my cousin, Baba’s only nephew, and I would just have to trust Baba and Amma. As if I had any choice. It hadn’t even entered my head to question their decision. All I knew was that daughters are born to be married off, and their parents pray to live to see that day.

What Dhaaga had said about Manda lingered in my mind, because I didn’t want to marry a thief. I thought about asking Amma about what Dhaaga had said, but I knew she would want to know where I had heard such a thing, and then Dhaaga might get into trouble. She knew he was the only one I talked to. Amma had seen me playing marbles with Dhaaga a few times and had
cautioned me to stay away from him, but I think after she realized how much I enjoyed playing with him, she let it slide and never mentioned anything to Baba or Grandma Ma-ji for my sake.

One evening, Dhaaga and I sat at the back of the house, watching Bindi nose her fodder from the iron bucket in front of her, eyes downcast. Every now and then, Bindi wiggled flabbily, swatting away flies with her long tail. Two birds flew down and perched on her curved horns.

“Bindi, you’re so lazy, even the birds think you’re a tree and perch on your horns!” Dhaaga patted her horns, and the birds flew away.

“She’s so fat,” I said. “Take her for a walk. Get her some exercise.”

“It’s getting too late now,” Dhaaga answered, brushing his brown wavy hair away from his forehead. “Your Baba should be home soon, and he’ll be angry if he finds I’ve taken Bindi out of the house.”

“I know Amma always lectures me on never leaving the house,” I said. “Otherwise, I could come out with you and Bindi. I think even if she doesn’t say it, Amma’s happy that I have you to play with, so that I don’t need to go outside.”

“Your Amma took me in, otherwise I’d still be begging on the streets somewhere,” Dhaaga said quietly. “I would never dishonor her or you in any way.”

At the time, I didn’t know how much weight those words carried in Dhaaga’s mind. I was to find out several months later, after a girl and boy were caught lying on top of each other in the fields in the early morning hours.

“What are they saying about that girl and the boy?” I asked Dhaaga the afternoon after the incident.

“What have you heard about it?” he questioned.
“I overheard Amma tell Grandma Ma-ji that when the women went to the stream early yesterday morning, they found Rasheeda, Masi Zuleikha’s daughter, behind some bushes with this boy lying on top of her. Everyone screamed and beat them and threw stones at them. Grandma told Amma that Rasheeda had dishonored the whole family and blackened their faces, and who knows? She might even have a baby in her belly, because that boy has been on top of her.”

Dhaaga listened to the gossip spilling from my mouth, then spat out the blade of grass he was chewing on. He raised his face, brown eyes squinting against the fading sunlight. “That poor girl, she might as well kill herself.”

“What?”

“That’s what some women do when they have no other choice.” His eyes were brimming with tears, and his face grew dark. “The Chaudhry’s son and his goons – they came to our house. My mother hid me under the charpai when the men broke the door, Kalashnikovs on their shoulders as usual. My father owed the Chaudhry in our village some money. When we couldn’t pay him back, the Chaudhry sent his son to bring my mother to him. As payment.” Dhaaga took a deep breath and held it there, like he wanted to keep any more words from gushing out of his mouth. He’d been talking so fast I thought he’d choke.

“What?” Something shivered inside me.

Dhaaga told me the Chaudhry’s son slapped his mother a few times when she protested. Then he grabbed her veil and threw it on the floor and tore off her shirt. All this time Dhaaga just hid under the charpai, his head buried between his knees. He said he didn’t do anything to save his mother. And he was so ashamed because of it.
Dhaaga’s body convulsed, and he let out a throaty sob as tears dripped all the way down to fall off his jawbone. I started to cry, too. I had never touched him, but that evening I did. I touched his brow, smoothed back his hair, and ran my fingertips across his eyelids, his cheekbones, his stubbled chin, wiping away his tears.

“Then your Amma ran away?”

“My father entered our house and begged them to take everything we had – our house, everything in it, even to take him. Just leave my Ma. The Chaudhry’s son bared his teeth like a hyena and spat in my father’s face.” Dhaaga sucked in air, then exhaled, his breath coming in short gasps as he released his clenched thoughts. He said his father tried fighting with the men, and then he heard shots of the Kalashnikovs, followed by footsteps running away. His Amma was wailing. And then there was blood, dark red blood flowing towards him – a river flowing out of his father’s body.

“My mother screamed at me to run away.”

“Alone?”

“She kept saying the whole village would hear what had happened, and she’d have no honor left.” He could barely speak. “People would point fingers at me all my life, say I was the son of the woman who had her honor taken away. She told me to go, saying Allah takes care of those who have no one to take care of them, and that He would take care of me, and…”

I couldn’t believe all that I was hearing. A part of me wished he would just stop telling me everything or say it was all a lie. But, now that Dhaaga had started his horrific story, I knew he wouldn’t rest until I knew it all.

“That evening Ma ran into the kitchen, poured kerosene oil over herself. She clutched a knife in her hand and told me to run away. Her eyes were like a mad woman’s. I pleaded with
her to let me stay, but she threatened to stab me if I didn’t do as she said… and…” Dhaaga’s voice trailed off as though the words were stuck in dark corridors within his mind. “I turned away from her and ran into the courtyard, and when I looked back, she’d struck a match, and her veil caught on fire, and she started to…to burn.”

“And you?”

Dhaaga couldn’t speak anymore. I made him drink some water and waited for him to calm down. He told me then that that was all he remembered of his mother, because everything became dark after that. He must have fainted, he said, because when he opened his eyes next, he was lying on a charpai in somebody’s courtyard. He heard voices coming. Remembering what his mother had said, he ran away.

“And you came to our village?”

He said he was from the village of Jalalpur Sharif where the mighty horse of Sikander-e-Azam, or Alexander the Great, was buried. His father had named him Sikander-e-Azam after the great warrior king. His father told him stories of Alexander, how he conquered the whole world. He wasn’t scared to go anywhere. “And one day I’ll be strong and ride on a black stallion, like Sikander the Great did, and I’ll have a big police force and ride into Jalalpur Sharif to take my revenge on the Chaudhry and his son, those thugs. I’ll show them.” Dhaaga spat out the words. “Look what the Chaudhry did to my father.”

In just a few minutes, Dhaaga had revealed his horrific secret to me. He had been carrying this burden for several years, and now I shared it with him. I didn’t know what to say to make him feel better, so I just sat there, listening to all that he was saying. He was quiet for a moment, as though he couldn’t believe he had told me everything, or maybe he was just exhausted from unburdening himself after all this time.
“Sometimes when I ride Bindi, I pretend I’m Sikander the Great, riding my black stallion,” he said, in a quiet way. “Bindi has this big white spot like a star between her eyes, and Sikander’s warrior horse had the same.”

“Mina, tomorrow I’ll teach you to ride Bindi,” he said, eyes suddenly glinting against the setting sun. “Sikander the Great married a Persian princess. You’ll be my princess, riding my gallant horse.”

I knew I would learn to ride Bindi for Dhaaga’s sake. If I shared his secret, I would help ease his burden. It seemed exciting to pretend I was a Persian princess riding the gallant horse of my warrior king, Sikander the Great. I decided that evening that Dhaaga would always be my king.

“If I’m your princess, then you should have a chariot for me to ride in, not have me ride on a fat buffalo.” I smiled at him. “Even that jinn in the pomegranate tree comes in a chariot to whisk the girls away!”

“Maybe I’ll steal that jinn’s chariot,” he answered, a smile playing around his lips. “I’ll wait in the dark under that tree and dress like a girl, and when the jinn comes to whisk me away, I’ll tell him I’m Sikander-e-Azam and kill him and take his chariot!”

“Mina! Where’s that girl?” Amma’s voice suddenly sounded from the courtyard.

“Go eat your dinner, Mina.” Dhaaga brown eyes lingered on my face. “I’m very hungry, and I don’t get to eat until you’ve all finished. So go.”

I turned back to look at him. He stood staring at me, his queen, who had been summoned to eat with her subjects.

“Goodbye, King Sikander the Great, ruler of the world. May you rest tonight and kill the jinn tomorrow to bring me my chariot.”
King Sikander grinned. “You will soon ride in your gold chariot, my princess, and cross the bridge over the Jhelum River to conquer the world with me.”

I bowed in front of him. He laughed as my veil slipped off my head, and I almost tripped over it.
Once Dhaaga revealed his secret to me, he talked more about his family. They had been tailors for generations and had served the Chaudhry’s family for as long as his father could remember. His father had even sewn ghagras for the transvestites that danced in the old haveli where the Chaudhry lived. I admired him for the way he spoke, determined to avenge his family’s honor by taking on the powerful Chaudhry who had destroyed his whole family.

One day, Ma-ji and Amma went away to attend the funeral of a village elder, a stooped old man who had offered children rides on his donkey for two rupees each. The rides would be free now that the old man wasn’t around to take care of his donkey anymore.

My family was to return from the funeral after reciting the evening prayer. I waited for them to leave before walking toward the back of the house in search of Dhaaga. Peeking into his room, I saw him sprawled on his tattered wicker-mat, hands folded behind his head, eyes focused on the tin ceiling. The years had slipped by, and that old wicker-mat seemed to fit only half of Dhaaga’s body.

“Your’re still dreaming of running away and becoming an officer,” I teased him. “But I won’t let you. I’ll send the king of jinns from that pomegranate tree to bring you back.”

“Jinns only come after young girls like you.” He turned toward me, his head resting on the curve of his arm. “What would they want from me?”

“I’ll make the jinn fall in love with me, and then he’ll do anything I ask.” I said, a smile poised on my lips, “even prevent you from leaving Tobay.”

“Let’s see how brave you are, Mina Panina.” He blinked and rubbed his face and yawned. Then he rolled off the mat, adjusting the leather strap on his tattered brown sandals. “I
was going to take Bindi to the stream. Let’s see if you have guts enough to stand under that pomegranate tree and wait for the jinn to poke his head out of a pomegranate.”

I stared at him, eyes widened. “I’m not scared, but I’m not crazy, either.”

“I’m just teasing you.” A smile played on his lips. “But, if we go to that part of the stream, you can splash around in the water. We won’t have to worry about anyone seeing you alone there with me.”

We both knew the villagers were all too scared to go anywhere near that forbidden tree for fear of being possessed by the jinn.

“I’m just as scared as the villagers.” A shiver stole across my shoulders. “What if he takes me away and makes me his bride?”

“Jinns don’t marry anyone.” Dhaaga walked out of the room toward the peepal tree and untied Bindi. “Anyway, it’s daytime, and they say jinns only come out after sunset.” Dhaaga swung open the wooden back gate, letting Bindi and me pass through. “Once the jinn knows it’s me, Sikander the Great, he’ll hide himself inside a pomegranate and not come out until we leave.”

I finally had the chance to sit behind Dhaaga, riding Bindi all the way to the stream, where I could play in the water with her. Most of the villagers were attending the funeral of the village elder. Maybe just this one time I could have fun with Bindi and Dhaaga, my only two friends in the whole world, and no one would find out.

Dhaaga knew a deserted trail that ran by the cornfields toward the far end of the stream, where the pomegranate tree stood. We decided it would be the safest route to take.

For a moment, I feared my cousin Manda would appear from the cornfields, holding a Kalashnikov, its muzzle pointed at Dhaaga and me riding Bindi. But, all dark thoughts soon left
me as Dhaaga hit Bindi with a stick and made her break into a waddly gallop. I laughed so hard that I grasped Dhaaga’s back to keep from falling off. My veil slipped down to my shoulders, almost slipping off Bindi’s back, but I didn’t care.

Once we reached the banks of the stream, Dhaaga led Bindi into the warm, muddy water. She completely immersed herself, only her nostrils showing, branch water lapping against her face. Dhaaga took off his shirt and jumped into the stream. I sat by the side, trailing my fingers in the slow moving water, laughing at him as he whipped the water with his fists, jumping up and down, grinning, and splashing.

“Come on in!” He waved, water sheeting off his brown skin and glistening in the sun like oil.

I uncovered my head, absently placing my veil under the pomegranate tree. The summer breeze gently teased the curls that had come loose from my braided hair. Mud squished between my toes as I eased my body into the warm water that danced up my legs, my hips, and my waist, filling my shalwar and inflating it like a balloon. Dhaaga laughed and splashed water on my face.

“You’re having fun, because you know the jinn only likes girls.” I hoped the jinn wasn’t watching us play near his tree. “Ma-ji said when she was a little girl, the jinn really fell in love with a girl who used to pluck berries near the pomegranate tree, and he transformed himself into a beautiful young boy for her sake, because he wanted to experience human love. He tried to make her fall in love with him, even brought her baskets of mangoes, guavas, and pomegranates every night as she slept in her courtyard, but she refused to love him back. So he transformed back into a fiery jinn and whisked her away in his golden chariot to jinni kingdom. Now she lives in the underworld as his queen.”
“I wouldn’t mind living in jinni kingdom as a queen.” Dhaaga half-smiled, playfully just
showing the edge of his teeth. “At least I wouldn’t have to knead Bindi’s smelly dung all day.”

I tried to half-smile back at him, but my mouth just awkwardly opened wide.

“I can count your teeth.” He pointed a water-wrinkled finger at me, as a wide grin lit up
his entire brown face. “Even the broken ones in the back.”

“I can count your ribs,” I teased. “It’s like you have sugarcane stems poking out of you.”

“You want to crawl under my skin?” He laughed, patting his ribcage. “I can hide you
with the sweet sugarcanes.”

“Hide me and take me where?” I pressed my forearms tight against my chest, suddenly
conscious of how my wet clothes clung to my body. “Where will you take me to?”

He stared at me, his eyes squinting against the sunlight. “Where do you want to go, Mina,
with the eyes of a cat? Yellow, green, brown, they keep changing color.”

“What color are they now?” Hands on my hips, I stared at Dhaaga, trying not to blink as
the sun’s fierce rays penetrated my eyes. “Tell me what color my eyes are now.”

“Yellow-brown, like a cheetah’s.”

I shivered in the muddy water, my bare feet gripping the wet soil underneath as Dhaaga
crouched down to his neck and waded toward me, forming gentle ripples. He gathered my hair
into a thick bunch in his hands and touched the hollow of my neck. I closed my eyes, wishing the
moment would last forever.

Slipping, stumbling, he lifted me out of the water and laid me gently under the shade of
the pomegranate tree. His breath was hot on my neck, dispersing the drops of muddy water that
lingered there. Our wet clothes were plastered against our skin. My head was spinning, but I tried
to come to my senses. I forced myself to open my eyes and saw a blood-red pomegranate
hanging low from the tree. The fiery jinn was inside it, ready to take me to jinni kingdom to be his bride. He was choking me. I gasped and pushed Dhaaga away.

“Dhaaga, the jinn,” I whispered, eyes fixed on the blood-red pomegranate.

He brought his lips close to my ears. “It’s just you and me under the pomegranate tree. I’ll tell you a secret: you can scare the jinn away with your cheetah eyes.”

“You think the jinn’s in our bodies now?” A knot of fear grew around my heart. I knew the jinn had seen us. “He’ll take me away, and there’s nothing you can do. You can’t fight him. He’s made of fire. You can’t even see him. And he’s not just any jinn – he’s the king of the jinni underworld.”

I turned away, hot tears stinging my eyes. I reached out for my veil and wiped them away and shut my eyes, afraid that once I opened them the jinn would squeeze me into a pomegranate or whisk me away in his chariot.

As if reading my mind, Dhaaga broke off the red pomegranate hanging low on its branch, and plucked out the blood-red seeds hidden inside, squishing them in his clenched fist. The juice trickled onto my veil, staining it red. “I’m so sorry, Mina,” he said, his hands dark red from the juice. “What was I thinking? I’m just a beggar boy, and you’ll be getting married soon. I had no right to touch you.”

Before I could say anything, a sudden puff of wind stirred the pomegranates, causing them to rattle against each other like skulls hanging from trees. A hover of crows erupted out of the cornfields. They flew as one dark body riding the breeze. The pungent scent of saffron suddenly filled the air, tightening my breath. I knew it was the jinn making his presence known.

“Dhaaga, the jinn is here,” I said, pinching my nostrils. “Amma said when jinns possess a person, there’s a pungent scent in the air like that of saffron, but only the person the jinn
possesses can smell it. I can smell the saffron, Dhaaga – it smells like wet grass after the
monsoon rains. Only it hasn’t rained in weeks. Somehow the scent is still everywhere. I know
that smell. Amma sometimes cooks saffron rice on special occasions.”

For a moment Dhaaga gazed around. Then he inhaled deeply. “I can’t smell anything,” he said, exhaling the air out of his lungs. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Twilight rose up around us as if the dark from the stream were seeping skyward as
Dhaaga pulled me up, wrapping my red-stained veil around me. He steered Bindi out of the stream, water flowing in sheets off her back. I quickly straddled her, still feeling the press of Dhaaga’s body against my stomach and back. Climbing up behind me, Dhaaga steered Bindi by her tail toward the secret trail to the back of the house.

“We’ve dishonored the haunt of the jinn, and now he’s going to punish us,” I said, wishing the saffron scent would disappear. “Say something to make me feel better. Say you’re Sikander the Great, not afraid of anything.”

“I can never be Sikander,” Dhaaga said firmly. “Nobody can. But, I can be brave like him. Sikander fought his greatest battle here. The blood of his soldiers must’ve soaked these fields.”

I glanced around, imagining a great battle being fought here, the spirits of the dead soldiers peering at us. We rode the rest of the way in silence. After a while, I breathed easily as the pungent saffron scent diminished. I wished I could think of myself as Sikander’s Persian princess breathing in the fresh air of my kingdom. My gaze fell on my red-stained veil, and all I could smell was the blood of soldiers, bludgeoned to death on the battlefield. The yellow cornfields, the sweet sugarcane fields, and the pomegranate trees had all sprouted from their blood. Maybe the seeds in the pomegranates really contained their bloody juices.
My thoughts were chased away by the sound of horses’ gallops as we approached the water well by the back of our house. A rider, clad in a black *shalwar kameez*, loose pants with a long shirt, with a black turban atop his head, approached us. Dhaaga hit Bindi with his stick, trying to make her go faster, but Bindi refused to comply, already exhausted from wading in the stream and hobbling on the trail. Dhaaga hit her again. She waddled along, proving to be no match for the approaching horseman.

“Mina, jump off! Run to the house! I think it’s Manda. He wears the black turban and carries a Kalashnikov. Run, quick… run!”

Dhaaga pushed me off Bindi’s back. With my heart thumping wildly against my wet clothes, I scampered like a rat toward the back entrance of our house. Crouching behind the earthen wall, I craned my neck toward the water well, fearing that Dhaaga might have dived into the well to avoid being thrashed by Manda.

My eyes searched and finally found Dhaaga sprawled on the ground beside the well, the grass around him matted red. I heard Manda’s raucous laugh as he hit Dhaaga with his Kalashnikov. Dhaaga covered his head with his hands and screamed. Dribble hung from his mouth. Manda jumped off his horse and dragged Dhaaga by the hair. As he howled with pain, I crouched lower behind the earthen wall, afraid that Manda would now come after me. I heard the *thud* of something hitting the well, clothes ripping, and a husky choking sound.

“Thief, stealing my Mina!” Manda’s voice collided with the muezzin’s call for the sunset prayer. “One of the villagers spotted you and Mina coming back from the stream. You son of a whore!”

Then, silence.
Manda stood over Dhaaga and spat on him. Slinging his Kalashnikov back over his shoulder, he readjusted the black turban on his head, climbed on his horse, and rode away amidst a haze of rising dust.

I ran to help Dhaaga into the house. Blood oozed from his hands, his hair, down his neck and back. His shirt was ripped down the front. His mouth formed words, but he made no sound beyond the clickings of a dry mouth.

I pulled him by his armpits and took staggered steps, stopping every minute or two to gulp in a large clump of air before dragging him toward the back entrance of the house, leaving a bloody trail along the way. He grimaced as I helped him onto the wicker mat in his room. Rolling my veil into a tight bundle and placing it under his head for support, I told him I would go fetch my grandma, who might already be back and looking for me. He nodded until his chin was at his chest. Then it jerked up, and he clutched my hand weakly. I crouched down to face him, my eyes filled with fear.

“Dhaaga, this was my fault,” I whispered. “Manda beat you because of me.”

“Don’t tell anyone about what happened to me.” His voice trailed away. “Pray that Manda doesn’t come… pounding on your door at night. If he says anything, say it isn’t true. Say nothing happened. Even if he beats you, Mina, say nothing happened. Even if the whole village looks at you and says you were dishonored, say nothing happened.”

“And you, Dhaaga? Baba will kill you. Everybody will want to kill you!”

The old wooden door by the front entrance creaked open, and footsteps sounded in the courtyard.

“Your grandmother’s in the house. They’re back. Go now.”

I started to protest, but Dhaaga shook his head feebly.
“Take your veil. No, tear it a little so I can bandage my arm and stop the bleeding.” His voice wobbled. “Your grandmother and Baba must’ve eaten at the funeral, so they won’t need me for the night. Tell them I’m sleeping, and they won’t come here looking for me.”

Tearing a piece off my veil, I bandaged his arm. He clenched his fist, looking away as I tightened the knot. Blood was oozing out of the deep cuts on his face. I tried wiping off the blood when my grandma’s voice sounded in the courtyard.

“I’ll come back to check on you once they fall asleep.” I smoothed back the hair across his forehead, soaked in his blood. He looked as helpless as the day my mother had rescued him from the streets of Tobay.

Raising his head, he winced and spoke, his voice hoarse. “Don’t come back tonight. Manda might return, and I don’t want him to catch you with me again.”

I shivered at the mention of Manda’s name. I was glad that out of the two of us, Dhaaga was still able to think of what to do. I felt numb as I entered the main house through the kitchen door and quietly slid into my grandma’s room to change my clothes. Rolling my torn, stained veil into a tight bundle, I slipped it in between my clean veils. As if I had just awoken, I entered the courtyard rubbing my eyes and yawning.

“Amma, I fell asleep in Grandma Ma-ji’s room.”

“You had me so worried. Now eat some lentils, and go to sleep. We’re all tired, too.”

I managed to tell her that I had already eaten, and even though she didn’t ask, I told her Dhaaga had also eaten, so she wouldn’t bother calling out for him.

Fear followed me like a hungry dog as I dragged myself into the courtyard where my grandma already lay on her charpai, mouth slightly agape in a low whistling snore. Settling down on my charpai, the moonlight snapping sharply in my eyes, I turned my gaze upon the wooden
door by the front entrance, half-expecting the sound of Manda’s voice commanding my father to open the door. The muzzle of his Kalashnikov pointed at my face, I imagined Manda screeching like a hyena as my father pleaded with him to spare my life. I clenched my eyes, imagining Dhaaga’s father begging the Chaudhry’s son to take him and leave his wife alone. What if my father suffered the same fate as Dhaaga’s father? I looked to where my father slept on his charpai and imagined blood dribbling down his face. Dryness seized the inside of my mouth. My thoughts turned to Rasheeda and how Grandma had said that with that boy lying on top of her, she might now be carrying a baby in her belly.

Dhaaga had lain on top of me under the pomegranate tree. What if there was a baby in my belly now, and tomorrow morning it started to swell? And the whole village stoned me to death for bringing shame upon them?

My nightmarish thoughts were dragged away by the roar of the train approaching our village, slowing to avoid collisions with bullock carts crossing the tracks. The carts, often loaded with stacks of sugarcane, traveled in the coolness of the night. Several collisions with the train had finally led to it being forced to slow down considerably as it crossed Tobay. Maybe I could run away on that train, so Manda and the villagers wouldn’t be able to find me. I’d talk to Dhaaga tomorrow and tell him to run away with me before my belly became round and fat.

I fell asleep, dreaming of the jinn with bloody pomegranate seeds bulging from his eyes and pouring out from his mouth like hot curry. He chased me through battlefields and along dirt trails girded by trees with gnarled fingers pulling at my hair, my skin, the nape of my neck. I saw bits of my body flying around, being carried into a deep dungeon by bloodied soldiers whose stringy tendons poked out through long, outstretched arms that grasped my feet and my legs. I cried out for Dhaaga to save me before the jinn claimed me as his queen. I heard Amma’s voice
loud and clear. She was calling out for Dhaaga. He must have come to save me from the fiery jinn. My eyelids cracked open.

Amma and Grandma were shouting in unison.

“Dhaaga is gone and Bindi, too!” Amma bellowed.

“I told you never to trust these rascal beggars!” As usual, my grandma blamed Amma for taking pity on Dhaaga and bringing him home. “All these beggars have bad blood running through their veins! Who knows where he might have taken Bindi? Maybe he’s already sold her in the marketplace.”

“I’ll fetch Manda and tell him to hunt Dhaaga down and bring him to me,” Baba’s voice thundered.

I had never heard him sound this angry before. A part of me was relieved that Dhaaga had escaped, but I wished he’d taken me with him. I expected the clutter of knuckles on our front door as the villagers showed up, demanding they kill me in the name of honor. I even took a peek outside the door, but the street was empty except for a few women carrying fodder on their heads for their buffalos. But, I knew now what it meant for a girl to lose her honor. It was when she wished she were already dead rather than have the villagers stone her to death. It meant pouring kerosene oil over her body, the way Dhaaga’s mother had done, instead of living a life of shame.

Ma-ji kept threatening to thrash Dhaaga if she ever saw him again until a voice called out my father’s name, beckoning him to open the door.

“I found your Bindi by the railroad crossing.” A young, hare-lipped boy, who played cricket with Dhaaga after the Friday noontime prayers, stood outside our house. “Bindi has
bloody stains on her belly and on her back.” He said he knew it was Bindi by the big white spot between her eyes. He guessed Dhaaga must have run away somewhere.

My heart thumped wildly. I knew what Dhaaga had done. He’d always dreamed of running away on the train that ran from Peshawar in the North to Karachi in the South, near the big Arabian Sea. He must have rode Bindi toward the railroad tracks and waited for the train to appear, smoke blowing from its stack, as it limped through Tobay.

Bindi stood in the courtyard, covered with flies feasting on Dhaaga’s blood, which had congealed on her belly and back. Thank God Bindi couldn’t speak. I led her to the back of the house and washed off Dhaaga’s blood. Tears dripped down my cheeks as I saw his blood darken the water, splattering around Bindi’s black hooves.

I buried my head in my veil, knowing the jinn was there, lurking around me, making his presence known. Maybe he had whispered in Dhaaga’s ears to flee Tobay that night and leave me alone to face Manda, Amma, Baba, and all the villagers once my belly swelled up. Why else would Dhaaga leave me all alone?
The days hobbled on when one night, huddled under my sheet, listening to the sound of the train as it slowed down near Tobay, I caught the quiet fumblings of sentences as my grandma and father conversed in low tones in the courtyard.

“You only have one daughter, no sons to carry on your name.” Grandma looked over at Amma’s charpai, making sure she was fast asleep. “I keep wishing for a grandson. The years are passing, and I’m getting old.”

“You have my consent to look for another daughter-in-law.” Baba’s voice rose in excitement. “I’m ready for another wife, a young girl to take care of me in my old age.”

Tears welled in my eyes. I knew men had two, three, or four wives at the same time, but Baba always said that the Qu’ran stated it was allowed only if all the wives could be treated equally. And that, he said, was not possible. Now he was doing just what he always said he never would.

“My sister’s youngest daughter Nazo is almost eighteen and fast becoming a burden on her poor widowed mother,” Grandma Ma-ji raised her gruff voice excitedly, as if she had just won a buffalo. “If you’ll agree to the marriage, I’ll make the arrangements. I’ll talk to Balu and Manda.”

“We’re helping lift the burden off your widowed sister’s shoulders. Allah will Bless us and Bless this house.”

In the charpai, I hugged myself tight, wondering whether my mother had been listening and was silently wiping her tears with her veil. How would my father treat her, now that a second wife would be taking her place?
Just as I had thought, the next evening Baba and Grandma called for my mother to join them on the wooden charpai after she had finished stirring spicy yellow lentils in our big copper pot, the fire lighting up her face. Baba lit his earthenware hookah and sucked on the snakelike mouthpiece as the sweet smoke of brown sugar and tobacco bubbled through the water in the base of the long pipe. He cleared his throat and spat between his feet, staring at the same spot while adjusting the loose white turban on his head.

“Mother-of-Mina, my obedient wife Shamo, I’ve no choice,” Baba said, a warning in his voice. “It’s a right granted to me by Allah. Every man wants a son. I’m no different.” He spoke slowly, stressing each word, as if he were Mullah Ishmail delivering the Friday sermon at the mosque. “It’s my duty to help lighten my widowed aunt’s burden by marrying her daughter. Allah will bestow His blessings upon this house, and I’ll have sons to take care of me in my old age.”

My mother’s hands trembled. She buried her head in her veil, turning away from my father. “Give me one more chance… Allah is kind.”

This time it was my grandma who cleared her throat, spat by the side of the charpai, and faced my mother, wrinkled hands folded in her lap.

“Ay daughter-in-law Shamo, your father also married not once, but three times. From the third marriage, your brother Billu was born, and now your father has a home to live in. If he only had daughters, where would he live once your mother died? It’s better to be a dog than to live in your daughter’s home. Where do you think I would live if I didn’t have any sons?” Ma-ji glanced at Baba’s hookah, but I knew she would never have the courage to smoke in front of him.

“Where do you think you’ll live when Mina goes to her cousin Manda’s home, and you’re too old to take care of yourself? You haven’t produced any sons.” Ma-ji rested her hand on her
sagging belly, as if praising it for having carried two sons and no daughters. “It’s time for
somebody else to come into this house and bless me with a grandson. It’s Allah’s Will. A matter
of honor for my son that he has a son to care of him in his old age.”

I watched from the kitchen as Amma sat quietly, listening to my grandma spit out her
wisdom. Then she slowly stood up from the charpai, the white muslin veil slipping down around
her narrow shoulders. Grabbing the hookah with both her hands, she hurled it against the earthen
wall. Smoke rose from the burning cinders, and shards of clay scattered everywhere. I rushed out
from the kitchen to help Amma while Ma-ji shouted obscenities, calling her a shameless
daughter-of-an-owl. Amma leaned against the earthen wall, her shadow huge and jittery from the
glare of the flickering fire in the yellow kerosene lamp. The charred hookah pieces were too hot
for me to touch, and I winced in pain as I knelt, trying to gather the mess. From the corner of my
eye, I saw Baba rise from his charpai, adjust his turban, and stalk out the front door into the
blackness, calling out to Ma-ji as he left.

“Mother-of-Mina will come to her senses and realize it’s only Allah’s Will.”

I wondered what Baba would say if my belly swelled up with a baby inside. He’d hurl
stones at it, not think of it as Allah’s Will.

Two weeks later, Baba dressed in a satin maroon shalwar kameez and put on pointy golden
sandals that curled at the tips. His eyes were chalked with kohl, and his hair, dyed bright maroon
with henna, matched the color of his clothes. Ma-ji dressed in a parrot green, gold-sequined
shalwar kameez. She wore her gold chain and two gold bangles given to her as part of her dowry
when she married my grandfather, Dada-ji.
My father informed Ma-ji and Amma that Balu Taya would arrive with Manda. Balu Taya had arranged a small wedding procession to the bridal village, Tindoo Khan, some four hours away on a bullock cart. That was also my mother’s village. But, Ma-ji had said it was forbidden in her family for girls to visit their parents’ home once they were married. She’d also changed my mother’s name from Yasmin to Shamo, because a woman’s old identity must be forsaken once she leaves her father’s threshold and enters her husband’s home.

Baba’s round belly rose and fell in anticipation as he paced up and down our narrow street, waiting for his wedding procession to appear. After a few minutes, I heard Baba shouting, his smile dazzling under his thick black moustache as a big white Land Cruiser appeared. Manda had surprised Baba by borrowing the Chaudhry’s Land Cruiser for the day. I had seen it before in our village when the Chaudhry drove by with two burly mustached gunmen pointing the gray muzzles of their rifles out the back windows.

The Land Cruiser was decorated with pink roses. Because the Chaudhry wasn’t inside, no riflemen were present. Loud Punjabi songs blared from the radio:

\begin{quote}
When Jugni goes to town
Her nose ring jangles
She wears eyeliner and long nails
And eats her samosa with chutney
\end{quote}

A gaggle of barefooted children followed the mud-splattered Land Cruiser. It came to a stop outside our house, and the children pulled off some of the pink roses that were taped on the Land Cruiser’s hood. They skittered away as Manda stepped out of the Land Cruiser in a golden shalwar kameez with a matching turban. Grabbing a little boy who had tried to pluck off a rose, Manda beat him with a stick he picked up from the side of the road. The boy squealed like a trapped mouse. He finally wriggled free and scurried off into the sugarcane fields. Manda flung the stick in the boy’s direction, straightened his turban, and joined in the singing.
Baba had also hired a tonga. Pulled by a skinny white horse, the wooden carriage was freshly painted a bright red and decorated with red and gold ribbons. The horse’s ears, tied with red ribbons, twitched when flies sat on them, causing him to swivel his head side to side to rid himself of the pests.

Atop the tonga sat a doli, a small open box ringed by red curtains. Two wooden poles extended beyond each end of the box. After the wedding the bride would be seated inside with four men carrying her to her husband’s home. As the horse-drawn tonga passed by the peepal tree where Bindi and I stood watching, a ribbon fell from the horse’s ear. I ran to pick it up and present it to Bindi.

“Take this other ribbon too, little nightingale.” A raspy male voice made me jump and hide behind Bindi’s haunches. “Next time I come here, it’ll be our wedding day. You and your buffalo will be ready to leave with me. Now take this ribbon, and tie it around your ankle for me to see.”

A red ribbon dangled from Manda’s long, hennaed fingernails. He curled the tips of his black moustache and bared his yellow teeth, stained red with the juice of the betel leaf he was chewing. He spat the red juice from his mouth, splattering it on my feet.

“I’ve kept quiet about you riding that buffalo with the beggar boy, but if that villager had seen you do anything else with him, I would have dug a grave and buried you both in it.”

I rolled my spattered feet back and forth in the dirt, one at a time, terrified that even cleaning my feet might anger Manda. Pulling my stomach in, I wrapped my veil loosely around it.

“When I come here for you, wear anklets like a dancing whore, and let me hear their jingle all the way back to my house.” He let out a low snicker.
I would rather burn myself than be disgraced in such a way. Even if I had dishonored myself beyond repair with a baby in my belly, I would never be a dancing whore. I once overheard my mother and Grandma whispering about girls in the cities who danced naked in front of men, who then showered them with money. At least I hadn’t danced for Dhaaga or taken my clothes off in front of him. We had just lain on top of each other, both of us clothed. I’d never asked him for any money – not that he ever had any. Anger and fear mingled inside of me, and I leaned against Bindi for support. Bindi turned around so that her fat haunches faced Manda. Then she raised her tail, emitting glorious green dung that covered his pointy, golden sandals, turning them a rich, dark green.

“Cha Cha Farid!” Manda spat out my Baba’s name as villagers gathered around to watch the wedding procession. Laughter rippled through the crowd when someone pointed to Manda’s dung-covered sandals. If only Dhaaga were here to see how Bindi, in her own quiet way, had avenged his beating.

“Cha Cha Farid!” Manda shouted again into the courtyard, where my grandmother was applying fresh butter to my father’s hair to make it glisten in the skin-cracking heat. “I come to your house in a Land Cruiser, and this is how I’m greeted? Tell your daughter to fetch water and wash my feet.”

Baba glared at me, gesturing with a swift wave of his hand to obey Manda’s command. I fetched water from the well and washed Manda’s feet and his golden sandals, which would smell of dung no matter how many times they were washed.

The wedding procession left amidst the sound of Punjabi songs blaring from the Land Cruiser. Watching the bride’s red doli with its bright red curtains swaying from side to side, I was reminded of a small, bloodied birdcage.
At home, Amma dutifully prepared the bridal room, spreading fresh bed sheets over the marriage bed and covering them with a red satin bedcover. She removed her faded wedding picture and asked me to take it to Dhaaga’s old room, where the two of us would sometimes be sleeping now, since there were no extra rooms in the main house. Next, she burned Bindi’s dried dung over a low fire, the acrid smoke smarting Amma’s eyes as she cooked pieces of lamb with potatoes in a rich, spicy curry. Then she kneaded water into wheat flour to make flat, round chappaties on a pan over the fire. This was her duty, no questions asked. I wondered if she thought this was her punishment for not producing any sons for Baba.

“My mother, your Nano, said Allah’s on the side of those who accept Allah’s Will. We’re poor, and we’re women. It’s not our place to question,” she said when she saw me standing by the fire, rubbing my watery eyes as the smoke swarmed all around me. She always knew what I was thinking, even when I didn’t say anything. “Where will we go, huh? Beg on the streets if Baba throws us out? Nano said I should never look back at her house once I sat in my doli to go to your Baba’s house. Only my coffin will be brought back to my mother.”

I knew that with Nazo coming to live as Baba’s bride, Amma was already upset enough. It wasn’t like she wasn’t strong enough to dissuade Baba from marrying Nazo. Amma just accepted her fate, never questioning anything. So I discarded any thoughts I’d had of telling her how I might be with a child now. I knew if I said anything about Dhaaga and me, it would kill her. Who knew? She might even set us both on fire, the way Dhaaga’s mother had done, to avoid a life of shame.
I quietly walked over to the earthenwall surrounding our house and mixed clay, buffalo dung, and water to repair it in places that it had crumbled from the heavy downpour of monsoon rains. I could feel a slush of fear stirring hotly in my stomach as I scooped out dirt and sifted it through my fingers, wishing I could dig a grave under the wall for myself.

Dust from the feet of the people in the wedding procession rose in gray clouds as they returned at sunset with the new bride. She wore a red shalwar kameez with garlands of red roses around her neck. Baba and Ma-ji proudly wore garlands in the form of one-rupee notes stapled together. Two steel trunks containing Nazo’s dowry and two braying goats also arrived with the procession. Amma and I were dressed in satin shalwar kameezes and large silver-sequined veils to welcome the new bride. Amma graciously guided Baba and Nazo to a charpai in the courtyard, and handed Baba a glass of sweetened milk. When he had drunk from it, Ma-ji, who stood nearby, urged him to give it to Nazo. She took a small sip in an act of ceremonial obedience to her husband.

That night as Baba and Nazo entered their bedroom, Amma stood by the kitchen door, quietly watching them. Ma-ji told her to go sleep on her charpai in the courtyard, but Amma stood still, her dark, deep-set eyes frozen, mouth open in a silent, anguished cry as she leaned against the wooden doorframe. She had been so quiet all day. Now I feared she might do something to anger my grandma. As I helped Amma take a few small steps toward the charpai, she clutched my arm, wheezing and grasping her throat.

“Fetch lassi, and make her drink it.” Ma-ji watched from her charpai, next to Amma’s in the courtyard.
I scurried toward the kitchen to retrieve cold yogurt *lassi* drink from the earthenware jug, while Amma sat on the floor, ankles crossed, facing her old bedroom. A low moan escaped her, and she cried, beating her chest like a drum, pouring out her anguish, wailing like a mad woman. Ma-ji shushed her, putting her hand on Amma’s mouth, which just made it worse. Amma bit Ma-ji’s finger. Ma-ji cursed her, calling her a shriveled-up donkey. I felt frightened watching my mother. Either she was dying, or the jinn had possessed her body.

This was all my fault. Maybe the jinn really was punishing us, because everything bad that had happened started after Dhaaga and I shamed ourselves under the pomegranate tree. Manda beat Dhaaga to a pulp, and Dhaaga had fled Tobay. Baba married his younger cousin Nazo, and Amma had gone mad.

“What’s this?” Baba entered the courtyard to see what was wrong with Amma. She was sobbing uncontrollably, her head lowered onto her arms, the grief spilling out. “The villagers will think there’s a funeral at our house, not a wedding. Sit, sit down. I am here now. Shush.” He cupped his hand over Amma’s lips.

For the first time in my life, I saw my Baba hold Amma in his arms as if she was a little girl. Nazo, red glass bangles dangling from her arm, also came out of her bedroom and sat next to Amma.

“Go, bride.” Ma-ji patted Nazo’s arm, and the bangles jingled some more. “Go wait for him in the bedroom.”

“Ma-ji,” Nazo whispered in a quiet but sharp voice, “I’m afraid to sleep in a room by myself. Can I sit here with all of you in the courtyard?”

Baba was scared, I think, that his new bride might also shake uncontrollably if he didn’t listen to her. So he motioned for me to go with Nazo to the bedroom. This calmed Amma.
she finally went to sleep, Baba covered her with a sheet and came to his bedroom. He asked me to fetch his new hookah. As I turned to go, Nazo, whose eyes had been following a yellow lizard creeping up the wall, quickly shut her eyes and rolled over, pretending to be asleep.

The next morning, Ma-ji told Nazo to dress in her shocking pink organza shalwar kameez and wait in the courtyard for the village women who were coming to meet the young bride. Nazo’s veil kept falling off her head. Ma-ji chided her for not securing it with a hairpin. Nazo quietly covered her head until the veil slipped off again. Amma and I watched from the kitchen window that opened into the courtyard and kept collapsing into giggles.

“I have a hairpin.” Amma’s eyes danced with excitement. “I won’t give it to her though.”

“Every time she tries to keep her veil from falling off her head, a fly sits on her. She swishes it away, and the veil falls again.” We laughed so hard that Ma-ji flung a flyswatter in our direction.

“Mina, go fetch me the money lying under my pillow.” Ma-ji waved her hand at me.

“The khusras must have heard about Nazo… uh, Nasreen – remember, that’s her new name now that she’s your Baba’s wife.”

The khusras lived within their own community, dressed as flamboyant women, and were never required to remain behind a veil. The village women knew that some of the men visited the transvestite house to watch them dance and please them in ways the men’s wives would have thought shameful. Khusras appeared uninvited at weddings and in houses where a birth was announced, dancing and demanding money from the host. As much as the villagers despised them, they never refused their demands, because khusras were both man and woman in one body and possessed the power to bless or curse a house.
So when the women arrived in the afternoon, six or seven of them, two *khusras* led the way, their bright flimsy veils slung carelessly over their shoulders, hips grinding under tight-fitting satin shalwar kameezes that choked their bodies. The respectable village women followed, covered from head to toe in black burqas.

“Ya Allah, we heard.” The older *khusra*, gray stubble showing beneath the heavy foundation on his face, had a melodious, high-pitched voice. He fluttered his large, chunky hands, fingernails painted a shimmery purple. Then he tilted his head to one side, letting his long black hair, plastered with thick, pasty henna resembling Bindi’s dung, fall over his shoulder.

“News is all over Tobay. We have a new bride. Where is she?”

Amma and I laughed at the *khusras*. Ma-ji handed them money and asked them to leave.

“Send us away and anger the spirits!” The younger one spat his words out, kajol-chalked eyes flashing sideways. “We’re here to give our blessings, same as these women.”

Ma-ji stepped aside as they strutted across the courtyard toward Nazo. The older one cooked me with his dark eyes when he caught me staring at him through the kitchen window. I lowered my gaze, hoping he wouldn’t speak to me. He made me feel jittery.

“Ay, bride.” The older *khusra* sat cross-legged on the charpai beside Nazo. “So young, so sweet, like a nightingale. May she become the mother of a son, of ten sons. *Hai-hai*, do you talk? What’s your name?”

“Don’t bother the young bride.” A gruff voice carried across the courtyard. “She must miss her mother, poor child. Her first day in her husband’s home.”

All eyes turned toward the entrance door. An old *khusra* leaned against the door that was already in danger of falling off its rusted iron hinges. His mascara-smudged eyes were red and swollen under pepper-gray, unplucked eyebrows. Dressed in a loosely-fitted white shalwar
kameez, the color of mourning, he adjusted his large black veil over his head, running his fingers through the greasy strands of hair lying across his forehead. He then waved at his two companions.

“Why enter homes where we’re not wanted?” The words fell heavily from his mouth. “I travelled all the way from Lahore to attend my mother’s funeral in Tobay, but my father refused to let me enter my own home, saying I should stay away, not tarnish my mother’s name at her funeral. He’d told the villagers I was dead. Better dead, he said to me, than to be leading the life of scum in a transvestite brothel in Lahore.”

“Bibi, I smell sweetened cardamon rice in the kitchen,” the younger transvestite said, fluttering his thick, lacquered fingers. “Let’s eat first, and then put you on the bus to Lahore. I’m hungry. At least your father could’ve given us food. What a cheapo, your father.”

He then made an elaborate display of being wounded. The women laughed at him in unison.

“I swear upon my mother’s grave, I’ll never eat from a house in Tobay.” Bibi held his head up high, letting his loosely braided gray hair fall over his stooped shoulders. “You and Phool eat. I’ll wait outside.”

He turned around slowly and hobbled out the door, leaning on his stick. The other two walked over to where Amma and I stood, flapping away flies as they hovered over the sweetened rice.

“Give us some rice,” Phool said, his hennaed head cocked at us, hands planted on his hips, “and we’ll be on our way.”

“Here’s another twenty rupees,” said Ma-ji quickly. “Now go your way.”
“We’ll take fifty rupees,” said Phool, his kajol-rimmed gaze fixed on Ma-ji’s cheek.

“And then we’ll go. May Allah then Bless this house with grandsons.”

Ma-ji reached into her bra for more money and handed it to Phool, who quickly stuffed it in his own bra. The transvestites walked out the door, their six-layered anklet bells jingling as they shook their flat bottoms and stuffed bosoms, flashing coquettish glances at the women who turned their heads in embarrassment.

“If I walked like that, my hips would break,” Guddy, a mother of seven children, laughed, baring four good teeth hanging crookedly from her gums like dried out corn seeds.

“Mina, here, take some rice in this bag,” Amma whispered to me. “Give it to that old transvestite, Bibi, I think his name was. His mother’s dead, poor thing. The skin under his eyes was bruised from crying for her.” She peered over to where Ma-ji sat in the courtyard. “If they’ve gone too far, just come back. Go through the back door so that your grandmother doesn’t see you.”

I remembered the day Amma had brought Dhaaga in from the streets and how red and swollen his eyes had been from crying for his mother. Even though I felt frightened running after transvestites, I knew Amma really wanted to comfort the oldest of them who had lost his mother. I hoped the rice would leave him with some good memories of Tobay. I ran through the back entrance clutching the bag of rice in my hand. Bibi limped on his stick behind the other transvestites, stopping to sit by the water well.

“Bibi, my Amma said to give you this,” I said, handing him the bag. “We’re sorry your mother’s dead.”
For a moment, he stared at me then quietly looked away, rubbing a hand along his stubbled jaw. “My mother’s dead, and I’m her wretched transvestite son who couldn’t attend her funeral.” He wore a sad, absurd smile. “There’s nothing for me in Tobay now.”

“Take the rice,” called out one of the younger transvestites. “You need to eat something before your long journey.”

“Just put me on the bus to Lahore,” Bibi said, raking at his hair with his etched, spotted hand. “I’ll eat something when I get there.”

I quietly placed the bag of rice by Bibi’s side and turned to go.

“Child,” he called out from behind me, “you’re the only one who has given me food the day my mother died. The only kind person in Tobay who showed me any respect. I’ll never forget. If you ever come to Lahore and there’s anything I can do for you, tell me.”

With my eyes trapped wide open, I nodded my head. “I know someone who’s in Lahore. I want to see him again, but I can never go there.”

Bibi smiled, revealing a rocky line of bottom teeth. “And who do you know there?”

“He might be an officer now.” I gazed into his eyes, like wells of gentleness, and somehow told him what was in my heart. He was my only link to the city, and not realizing at the time how big a city is, I hoped he would run into Dhaaga somewhere. It felt good to talk about him after all this time. “His name’s Dhaaga, and if you see him, tell him Mina’s still waiting for him to come back. Tell Dhaaga I can’t face the villagers alone, if Manda tells them we went near that forbidden tree. Tell him I’m scared that what Ma-jí said might have happened to that girl Rasheeda will happen to me. Just tell him that, and he’ll know.”

“Child, whatever did you do? If you’re talking about having gone near that pomegranate tree where the jinn lives, bad things will happen to you.” Bibi’s words collided with Ma-jí’s calls
for me to bring Nazo’s steel trunks with her dowry out of her room and into the courtyard for the women to see, and I went back without answering Bibi.

I dragged the trunks out to the courtyard by my grandma’s charpai and opened the first one. It contained shalwar kameezes, all satiny, brightly colored, and sewn with gold and silver sequins and beads in intricate patterns. There were matching colored parandas to braid her hair with and five pairs of pointy-heeled shoes. Her make-up box contained Swiss Miss and Medora lipsticks in shocking pink and dark red shades, dark pink rouge, black kajol, Tibet Snow Crème, mustard seed oil, Rexona and Lux soaps, Medora egg shampoo, and a gold hairbrush and comb set. The second trunk held towels, embroidered bed sheets, and two quilts: a bright purple quilt with peach-colored roses and a dark blue one with gold threaded designs.

The toothless women oohed and aahed, tracing their hennaed fingers over the satiny clothes and sequined veils and smelling the soaps and shampoos. Guddy removed Nazo’s veil to admire her dangling gold earrings and necklace. Razia-ji, whose husband had also wedded another bride, raised Nazo’s head to get a closer look at her gold necklace.

“What’s your name, bride?” Her knotted fingers caressed the necklace.

“Nazo,” she said in a low voice.

“Nasreen is the new name I’ve chosen for her,” Grandma chimed in before calling out to my mother. “Mother-of-Mina, hurry up with the food!”

“Ay.” Razia-ji narrowed her sun-faded eyes and stared at my grandmother. “I said to my husband’s second wife, ‘You’re young, but I’m not yet dead.’ I said to her, ‘You’re half my age and half my size. You make trouble for me, and I make double trouble for you.’”

The older women seated around Nazo buried their faces in their veils, letting out muffled laughs.
Ma-ji glared at the women and patted Nazo’s hand, as she sat still, her gaze focused on her pointy pink shoes. Placing her dowry inside the steel trunks, I wondered whether she had really wanted to marry a man old enough to be her father.

Amma brought the dessert first; it was customary in our village to serve dessert to the wedding guests before the main meal. Amma served the sweetened cardamom rice with fresh cream. Lamb curry followed with hot flatbread and salty yogurt lassi.

As soon as the stooped, toothless party departed, Nazo went into her room, closing the door behind her. Amma and Ma-ji lay down on the charpais. I went to sit with Bindi, who now had two goats to keep her company. I felt better for Bindi. She probably missed Dhaaga, because I didn’t spend as much time with her as he had.

During the next few days, Nazo stayed in her room all day, only coming out when Ma-ji asked her to join her on the charpai. Ma-ji would call her by her new name, Nasreen, but she sat motionless, refusing to respond. Ma-ji and Baba even scolded her a few times, saying she must learn to obey them, but Nazo would just lower her head, not uttering a word. Finally, Ma-ji just gave in and called her Nazo.

Ma-ji often dozed off while puffing away on Baba’s hookah, and one day I caught Nazo blowing smoke rings from the hookah by Ma-ji’s side as she slept.

“Baba will kill you if he finds you smoking.” Maybe I should have let her get caught.

“So let him.” She carelessly dangled her legs from the charpai and blew out a puff of smoke that climbed over her shoulder.

“You’re not scared?” I knew I would never have the guts to do anything like that even if I wanted to. “You’ve even refused to answer to your new name.”
“Nasreen,” she said, waggling her head. “The girl who’d sweep the floors in our house, her name was Nasreen. Hate that name. Just like I hate sitting here swatting flies all day, watching this old goat smoking and snoring.”

“Then ask Baba and Ma-ji to choose another name for you.”

“I don’t want another name.” The agitation in her voice was obvious. “Just like I didn’t want to marry an old buffalo.”

“My Baba’s not an old buffalo,” I said, walking away from her. “I’m going to sit near Bindi. Dhaaga’s not here to keep her company anymore.”

“Dhaaga?” Nazo followed me to the back of the house. “What kind of a name is that?” I told her how Dhaaga had entered our lives. She listened with an amused look in her eyes.

“What was his real name?” Nazo squatted with me under the shade of the peepal tree, watching Bindi chew her curd. “Not that it matters, if he was just a beggar boy.”

“Sikander was his name, after the mightiest warrior of all times, and he wasn’t a beggar boy, not really,” I said defensively. “He just became one after his father died, and he had no where to go.”

Nazo rolled her head back and laughed. “A dirty beggar boy named after the greatest king. The king must be turning in his grave.”

“Who knows where Dhaaga is now?” I said, gazing at the broad cornfields and past them the wooded slopes of the Salt Range Mountains, wishing Dhaaga would magically appear.

“Maybe like the mighty king he was named after, your beggar boy’s in his grave, too.” Her voice was like a fist, pounding my heart.
“Don’t ever say that about Dhaaga,” I said, feeling my blood dry up inside my body at the prospect of his death. “I know he’s alive somewhere. One day I’ll meet him. I know I will. I’ll find him somehow. I will.”

An odd-sounding laugh escaped her lips, but her eyes held mine for a moment, as though she was studying me, almost mocking me in some way. If only I could have read her thoughts and recognized her for the devil that she was.
A few weeks later, we had an unexpected visitor from Nazo’s village. An old woman stepped down from a horse-drawn buggy, her countenance covered in a black burqa, eyes caged behind two lace-covered openings. She stood by the door, holding an old wooden stick for support.

“I’m here to see the bride,” she spoke in a hoarse whisper. “I’m the midwife who delivered Nazo. Her mother told me to visit Nazo the next time I passed through Tobay. I have only five minutes.”

She gazed into the courtyard. Hands on her hips, Ma-ji stood by the wooden front door and invited the woman in. When Ma-ji reached out to help take off her burqa, the old woman pushed her hand away.

“I have only five minutes,” the midwife repeated. “I must go to another village for a delivery. Where is sweet Nazo? I’ll wait outside in the buggy. I only have the horse and buggy for one day.”

“How’s my little sister, Nazo’s mother?” Grandma glanced at the wooden carriage. “Did she send anything for Nazo or me?”

“Good, good wishes.” The old woman’s head waggled. “Next time your sister said she will send sweetmeats and bangles for sweet Nazo and for you.”

Ma-ji seemed disappointed with the answer. I knew she was surprised that her sister hadn’t sent any gifts with the midwife. She gestured for me to fetch Nazo from her room.

“Nazo?” I tapped on the green door to her room. It was slightly ajar, so I peeked in. She sat by the white dresser combing her long black tresses. Her hands were decorated with floral
henna designs, the nails painted hot pink. Placing her silver brush on the dresser, she pushed past me, almost knocking me into the solitary bulb that hung low from the ceiling. Dressed in a bright red georgette shalwar kameez with iridescent beads and sequins and pointy red sandals, she looked like Rani, the film actress.

Ma-ji and I watched her strut across the courtyard toward the entrance. Just as she shut the creaky door behind her, I caught a glimpse of her red veil slipping off her head, revealing her long, black hair.

The old woman left after a short while, and Nazo retreated into her room without saying a word to Ma-ji or to me. Once Ma-ji went into her bedroom, Nazo came looking for me in the kitchen, where I squatted on my haunches, eyes watery from the onions I was peeling. She had changed into a light blue cotton shalwar kameez and seemed in a light mood, saying we should meet by the peepal tree at the back of the house, instead of sitting in the dingy kitchen. As I finished peeling the onions and washed my eyes to keep them from stinging, I wondered why she didn’t have a veil on her head, or even around her neck.

“Where’s your veil?” I sat down to join her by the peepal tree. “Ma-ji will get angry if she finds you without one.”

“You want to marry Manda?” She ignored my question, sitting spraddle-legged on the dirt as she plucked off a leaf from the peepal tree.

“Dhaaga used to say Manda’s a thief who steals from people. But, I have to marry Manda. If I don’t, no one else will marry me.”

“Don’t marry him then.” She plucked another leaf and held it in front of Bindi who turned her nose away. Even Bindi didn’t trust her. She just seemed too clever. “Run away.”
“Run away?” My eyes widened. “Amma and Baba would die of shame. Anyway, there’s no question about me marrying Manda. It’s been decided.”

“I never wanted to marry your old Baba.” Nazo crinkled her nose, as if the mention of my Baba’s name evoked a strange odor. “Do you want to marry Manda when you miss Dhaaga so much? You’ll always miss Dhaaga even after you’re married to Manda. I know you will.”

“Dhaaga was my only friend,” I answered truthfully. “Stop telling me to run away, Nazo. I would never do that.”

“You can never love a man like Manda.” She stood up, slapping dust off her clothes. “You’ll always love Dhaaga. But, like your buffalo, you’re too foolish to understand.”

I knew Nazo was really speaking from her heart, and I secretly agreed with her. Even if I could never love a man like Manda, running away alone was something I could never think of, even in my wildest dreams. I was the only daughter Baba and Amma had, and I was raised to honor my family. Still, a part of me wondered whether I would have run away with Dhaaga, had he insisted. I pushed that thought aside. It was wrong to even think of things like that. That’s what frightened me about my friendship with Nazo. She seemed too bold, and she made me consider things Amma would kill me for thinking about.

As the weeks went by, Nazo never mentioned anything about wanting to help find Dhaaga. I kept quiet and never brought up the subject, afraid if I said anything she might have some kind of a plan that I would be too scared to be a part of. There was something odd about her, the way she laughed in that absurd way. Amma had warned me not to spend too much time with her. She said Nazo didn’t have any respect for Ma-ji and Baba, even refusing to answer to her new name. She
never helped with the housework, or said her five-time prayers, or anything else that an obedient wife and daughter-in-law should do.

I still talked to Nazo, though. I think I missed talking to Dhaaga so much that having Nazo around provided some relief from always thinking about Dhaaga. If my tummy swelled up, I knew Nazo, clever as she was, would be the only person I could tell my secret to. She would come up with some kind of a plan, unlike my Amma who would burn us both alive. Nazo seemed so brave, like she wasn’t scared of anything the way my Amma was. Amma never questioned anything Baba or Ma-ji said, and she had raised me to follow her ways. Nazo was different. She did whatever she wanted to, and she made me laugh when she imitated my grandma snoring on the charpai or put lipstick on and blew kisses in the air. So on nights when Baba led Amma to Dhaaga’s room, I crept into Nazo’s room after my grandma fell asleep in the courtyard, and we’d stay up all night talking. It reminded me of how I used to sneak away to meet Dhaaga in the afternoons.

One night I entered her room just as she was pulling out a plastic bag from her dresser drawer. It contained round white tablets.

“This lady doctor in our village distributes these tablets for free.” She swallowed one. “She said if I take one every night, I’ll never have any children.”

“If you already have a baby in your belly, can you take the white tablets and make it go away?”

“I don’t know,” she said, kajol-rimmed eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking?”

“Just wondering,” I said, swallowing hard as my secret made itself comfortable in the dry corners of my mouth. Then I turned to face her. “Why don’t you want a baby in your belly? That’s the only reason my father married you – so you’d give him a son.”
Nazo thought for a moment, then said, “I’m doing it for your mother.” She smiled, revealing smudges of red lipstick on her teeth. “I feel sorry for her. I know she loves your father, and if I give him a son he’ll never look at your mother again.”

I reached out and hugged her. “I wish I could tell Amma how you’re looking out for her in this way. But, she always tells Baba everything, and he’ll force you to give up the tablets, so that he can have a son.”

“Besides looking out for your Amma, I have no intentions of becoming round and fat and feeling sick all day.” She applied pink rouge to her cheeks, smiling at her reflection in the mirror. “My shirts will become tight, and I’ll look like Bindi.”

I wondered what would happen once my shirts became too tight and choked my body. I wondered why she was being so considerate of my Amma’s feelings and taking the tablets, when she had the chance to produce a son for Baba and become his favorite wife. I wanted to believe that Nazo was really looking out for my Amma, and I hoped all my fears about not trusting her were false.

After a week or so, the midwife arrived, carrying sweetmeats for Ma-ji from Nazo’s mother, who had also sent gold-speckled red glass bangles and an orange shawl for Nazo. Nazo missed her mother so much that she kept the shawl wrapped tightly around her for days and wouldn’t take it off, even in the blinding heat.

One night, Baba, as was almost customary now, took Amma into Dhaaga’s old room after Nazo complained of having vomited the spicy yellow lentils Amma had cooked. For Nazo’s sake, and because I needed a chance to enter her room and steal her tablets, I lied to Ma-ji, assuring her that Nazo had vomited at the back of the house, and I had covered it up with dirt to ward off flies.
and pests. It was all the better for my parents to be together again. Nazo sat up in her bed once Ma-ji fell asleep in the courtyard.

“Remember when I said if you help me, I’ll help you find out where Dhaaga is?” She spoke as soon as I closed the door.

“Yes.” I felt so excited, hopeful that I might really see Dhaaga again.

“You tell anybody, and I’ll tell them you and Dhaaga did something... bad.” A mischievous smile appeared on her red lips.

“You don’t know anything about me and Dhaaga.” Why would she even think of saying something about us when I hadn’t said anything to her? “I think you’re making up stories. I don’t even think you’ll be able to find out anything about him.”

“You’re so naïve, always scared of everything.” She applied another coat of Swiss Miss lipstick to her already reddened lips. “Come here. Part your lips, like this.” Nazo parted her lips slightly. “I’ll put lipstick on you.”

Amma had forbidden me to use lipstick before I got married, but this was too exciting.

“Help me.” A smirk played on the edges of her lips. “Or else I’ll stop taking those white tablets and get pregnant. Then your father will have eyes only for me, and your mother will go crazy. It will all be your fault.”

I narrowed my eyes and rubbed the lipstick off with the back of my hand. Nazo was no sister of mine, conniving against my mother.

“I want to leave the house for a little while. Ma-ji will let us, if we go out together.” Her eyes danced with excitement. “When that old midwife comes two days from now, we can go for a ride in her carriage.”
“That’s all I have to do for you? You’ll keep taking those tablets and help me find Dhaaga?”

She remained quiet for a moment. Then she looked me straight in the eye. “Your father never takes us out anywhere. Ma-ji never lets us go out alone except to wash clothes with your mother by the river. In my village, I’d sometimes run out of my house with my sisters and steal mangoes from the Chaudhry’s house. His guards chased us down the road with rifles in their hands, but we ran fast and hid behind bushes before they could catch us. Come on.” She clasped her hands together. “You go with me, and I’ll ask the midwife to ask around in the city about Dhaaga. She goes to the city every week. She loves me like I’m her daughter. She’ll do anything for me. She knows a lot of people in Lahore. Maybe one of them has heard of a boy from Tobay named after a piece of thread. I mean, how many people do you know called thread?”

“And all I have to do is go for a ride on the tonga with you and that old midwife?” My throat felt barren. There was nothing more to say. This was the only chance I had of ever finding Dhaaga.

“We’ll have just one day of fun. Just one.” Her mouth broke into a gaping smile, and she laughed in three short snorts, hugging me and slapping me among the bones of my back.

The old midwife stayed true to her word. After two days, she reappeared in her buggy. I left the talking to Nazo and waited by her side as she convinced Grandma that an innocent ride on the buggy wouldn’t be of much concern to anybody. Plus, I would be with her. It wasn’t as if she was going alone.

“Besides,” Nazo said, edging forward a little as her mouth formed the beginnings of a lie, “I might be carrying your grandson. Mina and I can take the load of laundry on the buggy to
wash it by the river, so I don’t have to carry it on my head. It’ll be so much easier if we can get a ride on the buggy.”

That should have melted my grandmother’s heart, but it had the reverse effect.

“You shouldn’t go anywhere with my grandson in your belly.” Ma-ji placed knotted fingers on Nazo’s stomach. I could have sworn that Nazo held her breath and stuck her belly out. Then she buried her face in her veil, emitting a low, wailing sound.

“Ma-ji, I’m missing my ma!” Her voice was muffled against Ma-ji’s body, squashed breath coming out in slow heaves. “If you don’t let me go, I’ll run away to my ma. I miss her so-o-o much! And then you’ll never see your grandson.”

It worked. The gentle wrinkles on Ma-ji’s face swelled a moment as she held Nazo close, saying she must never think of running away, at least not with Ma-ji’s grandson in her belly. Ma-ji told me to go into the kitchen and ask my mother to go along with us, but Nazo pushed me onto the back of the buggy, saying that with the laundry and the two of us sitting in the back, there really wasn’t any space left for Amma.

“You mother’s so old and boring, she won’t let us have any fun,” she whispered in my ear when I tried stepping off the buggy to look for her.

So I left, sitting at the back of the buggy with Nazo and a load of dirty shalwars, kameezes, veils, and my Baba’s white turban. The old midwife sat in the front with the driver. As soon as we hit the dirt road rutted with bullock cart tracks, parts of which had churned into black muddy bog from the passing of horses and cows, the driver broke the horse into a fast gallop. The unsprung buggy hit hard on every rut and rock as we headed past the corn and sugarcane fields directly toward the Jhelum River. On the banks of the mud-clogged river, some women stood out in water to their calves, their shalwars hiked up onto their knees as they
slapped clothes against stones, rinsing and wringing them dry when the midwife accidentally knocked the walking stick at her feet out of the open buggy. I thought we would stop to pick it up, but she motioned to the driver to keep going. Much to my surprise, she sat up straight, not crouched like before.

Men and boys dressed in loincloths bathed in the river, some pointing at the buggy racing down the dirt trail, stirring up plumes of dust as it rode past them. A stooped old woman carrying a bundle of hay on her head and trudging along the worn footpath that ran alongside the road, backed away from the path of the horse and buggy as the driver left the dirt road and headed toward the Jhelum Bridge around which Dhaaga said Sikander the Great had camped for days while planning his greatest battle. If only Dhaaga knew I was crossing that same bridge, the one he’d said we would cross over, with him riding his horse and me sitting like a princess in a golden chariot.

“We’ll go a little further and then turn around,” Nazo said when she saw that I was getting nervous. We were approaching the hardtop Grand Trunk Road.

The horse broke into an even faster gallop once we reached the main highway, choked with speeding buses, trucks, and cars. I grasped the end of my seat, hoping I wouldn’t fall out of the open buggy. The laundry rolled off onto the highway and was trampled under a speeding bus that overtook us like a camel racing to the finish line. I clenched my eyes because the rising dust and exhaust fumes from buses and cars left them smarting. My mouth and throat felt as if tablets of dirt had been shoved down them. Evening was on the edge of darkness when the midwife waved her hand at the driver to stop.
“We’re approaching Kharian City.” The midwife jumped off the front of the buggy.

“We’ll catch a bus from here to Lahore.” She took off her burqa and transformed into a young man with wavy brown hair and a clean-shaven face.

I didn’t know what to think. I just stared as he exchanged patches of words with the driver. Nazo gripped my arms and pulled me from the buggy, where I sat dumbfounded. Before I could climb back onto the carriage, the driver jumped onto the buggy and disappeared into the descending blackness.

“Mina, just listen.” Nazo’s mouth swung open. She seemed nervous. I suppose she was scared I might start screaming and cause a scene. “This is Aasif, the man I love. He’s from the upper Arian caste.” She spoke hurriedly. “His family would never have allowed him to marry a girl from our lower Kasai caste. They already threatened to have us killed to safeguard their family honor. I couldn’t burden you with my secret at home, but I need your help.” She grabbed my shoulders. “I promise you we’ll look for Dhaaga once we reach Lahore, but right now let’s hurry up before the last bus leaves, or we’ll be left stranded.” She tugged my arm, shepherding me toward the bus station. “One day we can help you to go back, but if you go back now, your father will make you tell him everything. Our families will hunt us down, and they’ll blame your father and dishonor him in every way. They might even kill him and your mother, too. Please, Mina, come to Lahore, and you won’t have to marry Manda.” The words were flung at me. “If you go back now, who knows what Manda might do when he finds out you ran away? He’ll say you lost your honor, and he’ll never marry you. What a disgrace for both your parents! And who knows? You might find Dhaaga in the city. Aasif will help you, I promise.”

“You’ll never help me find Dhaaga,” I cried out loud, anger and fear mingling as I panted. “You’re a liar, Nazo. You’ve tricked us all, my parents and Ma-ji and me!”
I pulled away from her, turned, and ran off into the dusty darkness, not knowing where I was headed.

“Have you lost all shame?” Nazo’s voice carried a dangerous tone. “You’ve dropped your veil, Mina. You go back, and some thug’ll get you, one of the Chaudhry’s goons. Worse, Manda might find you alone outside and beat you to a pulp and leave your body out for the vultures.”

She rolled my veil into a bundle and tossed it at me. I bent down to pick it up from the ground, and wrapped it around my body. Tears stung my dusty face but at least the scent of saffron had disappeared, letting me breathe easily.

“The bus station is up ahead.” Nazo grabbed my shoulder. “We have to catch the bus to Lahore.”

Several buses were lined up by the curbside, painted with flowers and animals, roaring tigers and cheetahs and elephants. Nazo and I waited by the roadside as Aasif purchased our tickets to Lahore. He came back with flatbread and mango pickle that we devoured within minutes. I licked off the last bit of the pickle from my dust-caked hands, not knowing when I would eat again.

We joined a crowd of people who surged into a bus that Nazo said would take us to Lahore. Everyone pushed and heaved, forcing more bodies into the bus, making room where no room had existed before. I’d never sat on a bus before and held on tightly to the edge of my seat as it gathered speed. The roar of the engine blocked out the babble of voices, and as darkness stroked me, my head grew heavy. I closed my eyes, wishing I were dead in a ditch somewhere. I deserved to be punished for dishonoring my family and carrying Dhaaga’s baby in my belly.
At the Lahore bus station, rows of buses idled along the curbside. Coolies, naked from the waist up, bodies dripping with sweat pouring down their backs in rivulets, lowered heavy suitcases with ropes and flung down lighter bags and rolled-up mattresses from the rooftops of the buses. The luggage landed in twin clouds of dust.

Inside the station, men and women stood in separate lines at the ticket booth. The two lines at the women’s booths were considerably shorter than the ones at the men’s booths. Some of the men got their burqa-clad women to purchase tickets while they kept an eye on their children and the luggage. It was, I thought, one of the few times that men must be grateful to have women in their lives.

I stepped off the bus, half-expecting Officer Dhaaga to receive me at the bus station, with a stick in his hand to beat up Aasif and Nazo for tricking me into leaving with them. I felt guilty. It seemed all eyes were on me, and everyone at the bus station knew I had run away and dishonored my family.

“In the name of Allah, give me… I haven’t eaten…” A grimy hand extended from the folds of a black burqa hiding the countenance of a beggar woman. Her black eyes, caged behind two net openings, peered at us. “Aay sahib… Allah Bless you with ten sons. Sahib! Sahib!” Her shrill call had started out as a plea. Aasif curtly dismissed her with a wave of his hand, and she slid into a series of rebukes, warning him to beware of the curse of a helpless woman. “Sahib, ay,
Allah is watching and will turn your money into shackles around your hands and your feet. Have mercy… mercy.”

The platform was thick with beggars. They besieged the buses as they spewed out men, women, and children tired from their journeys, dragging their belongings with them, eager to leave the congested station. Most people avoided the beggars like stray animals, a mere nuisance that didn’t pose any major threat.

“Get out of my way, stupid beggar!” A raspy voice sounded from behind me. I swiveled my head. A disgruntled man around my father’s age glared at me. “Standing around, ogling every man who walks by.”

I looked away, embarrassed that I was standing alone and absently peering at the faces of young men, hoping to find my Officer Dhaaga in the midst of this chaos. I must have looked like a beggar, especially with my unwashed face and dusty clothes. I hurried to join Nazo, who stood waiting for Aasif.

“Aasif has gone to get a rickshaw for us to go to the shrine of Data Sahib,” Nazo said.

“Only thing is it’s Data Sahib’s death anniversary, and it might be hard to find a rickshaw, a taxi, or even a donkey cart tonight because people are arriving from all over to go to the shrine.”

She spoke as if it didn’t really matter whether I heard her or not. As if I didn’t matter. We leaned against a street lamp, and finally, tired of waiting for Aasif, sank onto our haunches. As the night deepened, the frequency of arriving buses diminished. Only a few hawkers remained selling stacks of bananas, blackened in the sun’s heat and piled in baskets on their heads. Tea stalls closed. The exhausted workers joined tables together into makeshift beds for the night. Some slept on the dusty, betel-juice stained sidewalk.
A blue and white mud-splattered rickshaw lurched to a stop in front of us. Aasif hopped out, mopping his brow with his handkerchief. He instructed Nazo to sit inside. I followed like a beggar, hoping he wouldn’t shoo me away as the rickshaw started again with a jolt, its horn bleating like a lamb in distress. Whenever Grandma lamented that Amma had not produced any sons, Baba said that he and Amma should visit the shrine of Data Ganj Baksh. He said Data Sahib was the most celebrated sufi saint of Punjab, and people visited his mausoleum in large numbers. I felt heartened at the thought of staying at such a holy place. If I prayed very hard, my wish would come true: I would never have a baby. Instead, Amma would finally have a son, and then Grandma wouldn’t let Nazo come back. I would see Dhaaga again, and he would marry me and take me back to Tobay. My father would be so happy to be Blessed with a son that he’d forgive Dhaaga and me and let us live happily ever after.

Dhaaga. Dhaaga. Dhaaga.

His name reverberated inside my head until I was sure he would suddenly appear on a black horse, dodging cars, buses, and motorcycles. As the rickshaw darted and swerved through the congested streets, my thoughts lingered in Tobay. The entire village must be gathered in our house, offering prayers and explanations for what might have happened to Nazo and me. Maybe the horse had slipped, and we were stranded in a ditch. Maybe we had lost our way and would finally return home. Or, Allah Forbid, Nazo and I encountered the Chaudhry’s thugs, who robbed us of our honor. Hearing that, Amma would lose her mind and rip out her hair. Baba would die of shame.

The rickshaw made its way to Data Darbar. The shrine was a massive, dome-shaped building with a white marble façade. We joined throngs of people who, after checking their shoes at the main entrance, walked through the separate gates for men and women. Nazo and I
squeezed through a small entrance congested with women covered in large white veils or black burqas, some with small children hoisted on their hips. All of us pushed and shoved like the end of the world was here, and this was the only safe haven left.

Once inside, we walked over white marble floors strewn with rose petals, forming a delicate puddle of pink. Women and children squatted in groups or sat alone, leaning against pillars. Some women recited the Holy Qur’an quietly. Others lifted their hands to Heaven and chanted sacred verses. Still others wailed, eyes rolled upwards, their veils slipping from their heads, as if, bereft of all shame and honor, they demanded justice from the Creator for their misfortunes.

Uniformed women patrolled the area with bamboo sticks in their hands, ready to beat any woman who misbehaved. A window overlooked Data Sahib’s marble tomb, covered with garlands of pink roses. A security woman hit a young girl who tried to cut through the line formed in front of the window.

Overtaken by a mighty hunger, I was grateful when Nazo said we should eat something before we succumbed to sleep. She looked around. I peeped through my veil, wondering what she planned to do. She pointed at a woman sleeping in the shadows of a massive white pillar, the soft, round edges of a flatbread showing from beneath the folds of her black burqa.

“Go over quickly, and grab the flatbread,” Nazo muttered, her eyes focused on the crowd around us. “If she wakes up, take it anyway, but run away quickly. I’ll pull her to the side and calm her down. This place is so big. We can hide behind any one of these pillars and eat.”

Kneeling down as if to scratch my ankle, I reached out to grab her bread and hurried toward Nazo, feeling like one of those rats Dhaaga used to chase after in the kitchen while Amma and I screamed.
We ate in the cover of darkness, tearing at the flatbread, thrusting pieces as big as our fists into our mouths. At this point I was so hungry, I didn’t even care that I was eating someone else’s food. I glanced over my shoulder, fearful that one of the security women had seen me and would attack me. Washing down the bread with warm tap water, we draped our veils around us and, amid the wailing and the chanting, fell into an exhausted sleep.

As the morning heat gained the upper hand, we sat quietly in a shady corner, watching several women pack their meager belongings and leave after a night of chanting and prayer. I imagined the village women of Tobay must have spent the night at our house, praying for our safe return. Amma and Ma-ji must be sitting on their charpais, their eyes bruised from crying, hoping that the front door would swing open and Nazo and I would rush in, saying we had lost our way, but the midwife had kept us safe.

Nazo squatted beside me on the marble floor that was beginning to heat up like a kerosene stove as the sun climbed high in the sky. By midday we ventured out of the shrine and met Aasif, like he and Nazo had planned the night before. Leaning his broad shoulders against the entrance door, he offered a half-empty bottle of Pepsi to Nazo. She took the offered bottle and tipped it to her mouth. Then she smacked her lips, sighed, and nodded at the taste.

“It was crazy last night.” Aasif’s large brown eyes crinkled against the sun’s blinding light. “Did you find any place to sleep?”

“The marble floor was so hard, but dreams of you made it seem like a bed of roses.” Nazo’s black button eyes danced with cheap, dirty thoughts.

Aasif’s smile spread across his face like the flood waters of the Jhelum River.
Making our way through the congested alleys, we dodged rickshaws, bullock carts, motorcycles, and pedestrians. We walked past shops selling wedding day garlands with tinsel, rupee notes, and flowers, past posters with pictures of Punjabi actresses plastered on the walls and loud music blaring over loudspeakers. Vendors selling fresh mango juice and hot samosas girded the narrow alleys. Aasif said free lentils and flatbread were served at the shrine every evening, and it was best for him not to waste any money on food.

Aasif stopped and turned toward me, ordering me to go back to the shrine. He had decided to spend some time alone with Nazo. I stared at her. She rolled her black eyes and shook her head, as if implying that this was Aasif’s decision, and God forbid that she argue with him.

“I’ll get lost in this crowd,” I pleaded. “Take me to the bus station, if you don’t want me here, and I’ll go back to Tobay. I’ll tell everyone that the buggy we left on was run over by a speeding bus. You, the midwife, and Nazo were instantly squashed like mango pulp.”

Aasif’s eyes narrowed beneath his arched eyebrows. “Go back to Tobay? So your family can look at you with shame and wish you were dead instead? You go get smashed like mango pulp. Bitch, cursing me.”

“Mina, don’t create extra problems for us.” Nazo’s film-actress eyes pleaded with me. “You go back now, and Manda will bury you alive.”

I wished a bullock cart had really squashed us before we even reached Lahore. I reluctantly walked away from Nazo and Aasif, dodging heaps of rank garbage and children playing in the filth, as dirty as the garbage they clambered through. I thought of Dhaaga and how bedraggled he’d looked the day Amma brought him in from the muddy streets of Tobay. Ma-ji shaved his louse-ridden head, saying who would have the patience to pull the lice out one at a time? The only other alternatives were to spray DDT in his hair or apply kerosene oil. But, that
cost money, and Dhaaga’s head just wasn’t worth it. Now, with my tangled hair and dirt-streaked face, I was reminded of Dhaaga that first time I saw him. If only someone would help me the way Amma had helped him.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I nearly tripped over a beggar woman squatting on the sidewalk, her grimy hands extended outwards. Her teeth and the whites of her eyes were yellowed, and a sparse moustache lined her upper lip. A prominent black mole protruded from the tip of her chin, with two long hairs poking out from it. Her unwashed body stank so badly that I could taste it in my throat. I pinched my nostrils, walking hurriedly past a mirror hanging in front of a clothes shop and wondered whom that creature walking beside me was, holding her nose just like me.

The face staring back at me from the mirror was plastered with grime. A once white veil was now covered with brown stains. I stared, trying to convince myself that it couldn’t possibly be me. But, those eyes were mine. Dhaaga had called them cheetah eyes. He said they changed colors. I peered into the mirror. My eyes were grayish-brown, the color of the mud splattered on the sides of rickshaws and buses here. Spitting on the palms of my hands, I rubbed them on my face and ran my fingers through my tangled hair, which felt as ragged as the ends of Bindi’s tail.

I entered Data Darbar and waited for Nazo, who returned just as the muezzin’s call for the sunset prayer sounded from the green loudspeaker on the mosque. Bright pink bangles jingled in the folds of her veil as she wiped off dark red lipstick with the back of her hand. She smiled shyly, saying Aasif would soon find a place for them to live together.

“Remember the days you and Dhaaga spent together?” Nazo pulled me closer. “You told me those were the happiest days of your life. Well, I was with my beloved today. So how do you think I feel, huh?”
Adjusting her veil, she softly chanted a holy verse. I was relieved she was finally thinking about God; she might finally come to her senses and realize all the misery she had caused my family. Then I heard the words she was singing: they were from the song that had blared from the Land Cruiser the day she became my Baba’s bride.

_O Veer, she’s my Jugni_  
_When my Jugni sings_  
_She captures everyone’s hearts_  
_Jugni is the queen of fashion_  
_Slaps on some powder and red on her lips_  
_But her stomach is hungry and her pocket is empty_

I was so mad at her for making a fool out of me, but I also knew that once my belly swelled with my baby inside it, I would have no one but Nazo to help me. In case she and Aasif decided to leave me all alone at Data Darbar, I should confide in her and tell her about my worst fear and hope that at least she might come up with something I could do. What did I have to lose now, and who else could I turn to? So, I related to her the whole incident with Dhaaga and me under the forbidden tree, and that since Dhaaga had been on top of me, I might have a baby in my tummy. I imagined the baby balled up inside my body, shackled to the shame in my heart.

Nazo listened, her dark eyes widened. Then she blinked a few times, clicking her tongue. “Now I don’t feel guilty for tricking you into leaving the village. Maybe you’re getting just what you deserved, you little whore of Tobay. And a baby! Now I know why you kept asking me about the white tablets. I can’t believe you got all naked with Dhaaga outside in the fields!”

“We didn’t take our clothes off. We just lay there on top of each other.”

“And didn’t do anything?”

“That was bad enough.” I started to cry.
She listened with that smug look she always had on her face, then crept close to me and whispered how babies were really conceived. I just stared at her. If she was really speaking the truth about how babies were made, then she was right, and I had been a fool all along, thanks to Amma who never told me anything. A part of me felt stupid, while another part still didn’t believe anything she said. A third part was relieved that I had never actually had a baby in my belly. I didn’t know which part to believe at that moment. I racked my brain, trying to make sense of it all.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” She was half-laughing.

“I was too scared that Baba and Manda and everyone in Tobay would stone me to death or bury me alive. Ma-ji said that could have happened to that girl who was caught with that boy, and I didn’t want to die.”

She buried her face in the folds of her veil and laughed. “I still can’t believe you let Dhaaga touch you everywhere and never told me a thing, you little whore!”
The next morning Nazo disappeared. I spent the next two days crouched against a massive white marble pillar in the far-end corner of the shrine, cursing myself for letting my fear of dishonoring my parents and being stoned to death get the better of me. I wished my mother had told me how babies are really born, instead of talking about angels pushing them through windows. Now there was nothing I could do. I had been so stupid. Maybe I deserved to be punished. I couldn’t go back to Tobay. I didn’t have any money to buy a ticket, and anyway, it would be better if they just thought I was dead. Manda would have me killed in the name of honor for shamelessly running away to the city, when I wasn’t even supposed to leave the four walls of my house.

I wished I had told my mother that day that I had gone to the pomegranate tree the way that young girl had wandered off when the jinn captured her. She would then have believed that the jinn must have taken me to the jinni underworld, and that none of this was really my fault. I wished I could blame it all on the jinn, but that seemed too easy now. It had been Nazo, not the jinn, who had fooled me into leaving Tobay. It wasn’t the jinn but my own stupid, trusting self who had believed everything Nazo had told me. I knew I couldn’t trust Nazo to take care of me in Lahore. My only hope lay in finding Dhaaga.

Dhaaga was in the city somewhere. I knew that. I felt his presence. If he did not have a place to go to as yet, maybe he was in the shrine, too, in the men’s quarter. Maybe I would run into him one evening when lines for the free food were forming. I could only hope that would happen.
The days dragged on until I finally mustered enough courage to leave the shrine and walk in the crowded streets, hoping to catch sight of Dhaaga or Nazo, who still hadn’t returned. Walking in the heat of the day, I dodged potholes and mounds of stinky garbage, until hunger gnawed at me. Feeling exhausted, I sank to my haunches on the dusty betel-juice stained pavement. As passersby dodged me, the spicy smell of samosas wafted in the air and entered my nostrils. Following the scent, I turned my head to the left where tea stalls girded the traffic-choked street. A young boy wearing a grease-stained shalwar kameez was leaning over a large pan, turning over golden-brown samosas in sizzling oil. Maybe if I begged him he might hand me one. Otherwise I would have to wait all day for the free food served at the shrine.

I walked over quietly and stood by his side.

“Go away,” he said, raising his oily wooden spatula at me. “You want this on your face?”

As I backed away a little, he lifted two samosas, brown and dripping with oil from the large frying pan and placed them on a newspaper spread out on a rickety iron table placed by his side.

I shook my head, my mouth watering and eyes smarting from the smoke. He raised his hand to shoo me away but accidentally knocked over a samosa lying on the edge of the table. Without giving it a second thought, I grabbed the fallen samosa from the dusty street and ran away, hiding it in the folds of my veil. Crouching in a dark corner with the putrid smell of urine lingering in the air, I took quick bites of the burning hot samosa, fearful of packs of skeletal beggars and stray dogs grabbing it from me.

The next day I decided to go back to the bazaar, this time clutching half of a leftover flatbread I had saved from last night’s food served at the shrine, so I would not have to steal any more
samosas. Lost in my thoughts, I dodged a donkey cart, rattling and creaking down the street, carrying round metal pots filled with milk and sacks of flour and rice. A skinny-looking vegetable-seller pushed his cart loaded with large bundles of spinach, firm tomatoes, fresh okra, and leafy bunches of coriander and mint. For a moment, I stared at him, thinking it might be Dhaaga.

I saw Dhaaga everywhere. There he was, riding a bicycle or walking on the sidewalk, wearing a blue and khaki police uniform. I saw him in shops and at tea stalls. We are never alone, Amma always said, because Allah is with us. Dhaaga, too, I thought. He was in my mangled thoughts, in my red-streaked eyes, in my louse-ridden matted hair.

Thoughts of Dhaaga brought a smile to my face, and I paused to admire a pretty veil hanging from a shop. “How much for the red veil with the gold-sequined border?”

“Hands off! Diriting my veils!” The shopkeeper glared at me, stroking his scraggly pepper-gray beard.

“How much?” I didn’t know why I asked. I didn’t even have any money. I just wanted to touch the veil. It was beautiful, the kind that I would choose once Dhaaga and I found each other and he asked me to marry him.

“Hundred and fifty rupees. You have a hundred and fifty rupees? Go away.”

“Give the poor girl a flimsy veil,” a gruff voice sounded in my ears.

An old, slightly stooped transvestite, dressed in a neatly pressed, faded orange-colored shalwar kameez and hobbling on a walking stick, peered at me.

“Your kind has enough flimsy veils to fill up all of Heera Mandi,” the shopkeeper fired back, pointing a thick finger at the old transvestite. “Why don’t you give her one of yours?”
“The ones I have are a thousand times better than yours.” A smile lingered around the edges of his lipstick-smudged lips. Then he swiveled his head toward me. “Tobay. Those cat eyes.” He stared at me. “How could I ever forget?” He looked at me a fair length of time, then rubbed his hand on his forearm. “The day my mother died, you brought me rice. That was you. Did you ever find your piece of string?”

Bibi! My heart gave a small lurch of happiness. I had actually met someone who knew me from Tobay, even if he was an old transvestite. That day Bibi’s eyes had been red and swollen from crying for his mother. Now mine must have looked the same.

“These shopkeepers can keep their cheap, dusty veils, hanging from shops like coarse buffalo tails.” Bibi glared at the shopkeeper then swiveled his head toward me. “I’m waiting for the Chaudhry’s Land Cruiser to pick me up from here, otherwise I would’ve taken you to Heera Mandi, to the transvestite brothel—I have a beautiful green veil to match those eyes. Come to the brothel tomorrow.” He rubbed his eyebrows. “What happened to you that you’re here alone? You didn’t come all this way to look for your string?”

“I wish I knew where Dhaaga was. I should’ve listened to you and never gone near the pomegranate tree. I’ll come to your brothel, Bibi, and tell you everything that happened,” I said, wondering if I could ever bring myself to enter a transvestite brothel. I remembered how the village women had despised the transvestites for their flamboyant ways, for shamelessly dancing and entertaining their men and taking their clothes off in front of them, just for money. What if I entered the brothel and the transvestites forced me to do the same?

“This filthy girl belongs in a brothel!” The shopkeeper crinkled his nose. “But, who would pay to touch her?”

“Allah forbid someone should pay to touch you!” Bibi shot back.
Although I was grateful to Bibi for standing up to the shopkeeper, I felt ashamed at the thought of being compared to a dirty whore.

A white Land Cruiser, the kind that the Chaudhry in our village drove, pulled up next to the curb. As the door opened, a wrinkled hand adorned with gold rings on all the gnarled fingers slowly motioned at Bibi to climb in. Bibi clambered into the Cruiser. As it prepared to leave, he rolled down the window and stuck his head out.

“Come to Heera Mandi. That’s where the transvestite brothel is. I’ll help you. Those cat eyes will fetch you money.”

“Where’s Heera Mandi?” I ran after the Cruiser as it started to pull away from the curb, splattering mud on my shalwar. Maybe a question would stall Bibi’s departure, so that I could talk to someone from Tobay.

“You don’t know where Heera Mandi is, the red light district of Lahore? It’s fifteen minutes from here,” he called out. “It’s my home. The place where pretty young girls from villages, and transvestites with no place to go, earn money.”

I watched him ride away in the big white car, wishing I had enough guts to enter a cheap brothel. What if the transvestites cursed me for some reason? Everyone in Tobay was always scared of their curses. It was safer, I decided, to just stay at Data Darbar and eat the free food served every night.

My stomach growled with hunger. After a while, I squatted on the dusty sidewalk and lowered my head to take small hidden bites of the stale flatbread, the ends visible from the folds of my veil. A woman tossed a two-rupee note my way. Two scrawny beggar boys in tattered shalwar kameezes appeared from nowhere and grabbed the money from my hand before I had a chance to stop them. Without giving it a second thought, I ran down the street after them.
“Let these thieves have the money.” A woman covered in a stained black burqa, holding a baby in her arms, glared at me with faded yellow eyes. “What kind of a beggar-girl are you? These boys will stab you in the stomach for anything they can take from you.”

I sank to my haunches on the sidewalk, hoping the beggar boys wouldn’t come back.

“This is my corner from ten until six p.m.” The woman walked over to where I sat and stood looming over me. “I was late coming in today. What happened? Did Jhanda hire you without telling me?”

“Ye-hes,” I answered, wondering whom Jhanda was.

“He didn’t loan you a baby? They fetch more money. And hold an empty milk bottle. Like this.” She held the bottle in front of the starving infant who bawled, tears tracing glistening paths down its dust-coated cheeks.

A short while later a well-dressed couple walked jauntily by. The woman carried a glossy yellow leather bag that swung like juicy mangoes from trees in the gusty monsoon winds. The beggar-woman, whose name she said was Safia-ji, ran after them, emitting a low, wailing sound. She beat her chest with the bottle, and the baby cried loudly. The couple stopped. The woman gazed at the baby, then at her husband. He placed a ten-rupee note in the beggar’s hands and moved on.

I felt too scared to be on my own, so I followed the beggar-woman around. We pestered people for money all day, even running behind some if they chose to ignore us at first. Finally, as the evening shadows lengthened, we collapsed in a corner and counted our earnings. Together we had earned one hundred and fifty rupees.

“Time to take the money to Jhanda,” she said, stuffing it in her bra. “He has people watching us. If we don’t show up each evening, he’ll give the spot to some one else.”
“Who’s Jhanda?”

“You said Jhanda put you here.”

“I didn’t know what else to say,” I said, biting my lip. Blood oozed out, tasting like a metal tablet in my mouth.

“Jhanda is the pimp all work for.” She started walking down a narrow alley. “He keeps count of all his beggars. Come with me, and I’ll take you to him.”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to meet a pimp. I didn’t even know what a pimp was!

“Safia-ji,” I said, “can I have a little of the money and see Jhanda tomorrow?”

After some consideration, and once the infant started bawling again, she quickly handed me a two-rupee note and walked away.

That night, I stood in line for the free lentils and flatbread and ate in the shadow of a pillar, praying for Allah to have mercy on me. After a while, I lay down on the cold hard floor, rose-petals squished under me, wishing I were laying on my charpai in Tobay with Amma sleeping beside me, her thick braid dangling to the side as she reached over and stroked my cheek, her eyes smiling in the moonlight.

The next day my life’s earnings, my hard earned two rupees had disappeared. A thief had untied the knot in my veil containing my money and taken away what was not hers. I stood in line that evening to pray in front of the tomb of Data Ganj Baksh and asked him to help me. For the first time, I felt a communion with the saint; his presence felt like a soothing hand on my shoulder.

“Hurry up, your time is over. Get away.” A woman’s shrill voice sounded from the side.

“Throw her out.” A woman in a uniform hit me, and I fell to my knees. “Dirty whore, she sits here every day. Doesn’t pray. Just here for free food.”
She dragged me by my ear and gave me a kick that landed me outside the entrance.

“This is a holy shrine, not Heera Mandi.”

I leaned by a broken cement wall, wishing the ground would open and swallow me whole. Mounds of rank garbage lay rotting to my side, spilling onto the road. Crouching behind it, my weary eyes focused on a large crowd formed by the men’s entrance. Mystical Sufi music sounded over the loud speakers on a stage where eight or nine men rotated their bodies, their long strands of hennaed hair swaying from side to side in a frenzy of devotion. I felt mesmerized by the main singer’s voice soaring powerfully and gracefully as he sang in praise of Allah.

The music lulled me to sleep, even though stray dogs nipped at my ankles all night long. I was awakened the next morning by a couple of boys clambering through the rubbish, sifting and searching for stale pieces of flatbread left over from the night before.

As people finished their morning prayer at the mosque beside the shrine, several tea stalls came to life. Steel shutters crashed open. Cups and saucers clanked. Pots and pans banged. Young men in grease-stained shalwar kameezes, who had spent the night sleeping on the pavement or on tea-tables that had been conjoined into makeshift beds for the night, poured oil into large iron pans heated over gas stoves for fried puris to be eaten with curried chick peas and halva. Large tea kettles were heated, and teacups placed in a line on a wobbly iron table, to be filled with sweetened, milky tea.

I saw Safia-ji, the beggar-woman, come toddling along with her infant a few hours later. The soles of her feet were cracked and bleeding from a dozen lesions. Sorrow and desolation clouded her face. The baby, eyes yellow and droopy, dangled in her arms, unperturbed by the flies that fed off its greasy face.
Safia-ji headed for the tea stalls, holding out an empty milk bottle. A middle-aged man with thick wavy black hair and a pencil-thin moustache, dressed in a collared blue shirt and black pants, sat at a table, a cigarette slouched on his lips. He glared at Safia-ji as if she was the chief impediment to his living a life of comfort and ease. Then he ruffled through his pocket and pulled out a crumpled green note.

“My first morning in Pakistan, and I’m greeted by beggars and flies.” He waved the note at the young waiter. “I only have dollars. Here, take this, and get her milk for that baby. Then tell her to get lost.”

“Safia-ji works hard all day.” The words fidgeted in my mouth before coming out in a rush. Couldn’t he see the lesions on her feet? “And the baby’s hungry.”

The waiter flapped his hands at me as if shooing away a buffalo. The man leaned back in his chair, shielding his eyes from the sun. “Loud mouth. Why don’t you go look for a job?”

I edged forward to where he sat spraddle-legged in his chair, a hint of a smile poised on his lips, as if he was expecting me to narrate a funny anecdote. For the first time since I had left Tobay, someone, even if he was a total stranger, had actually thought it worth his while to ask me why I walked the streets all day.

“Where do I find a job, sahib-ji?” I spoke to his cup of steaming hot tea. “You have work for me?”

“In America.” His voice had the sound of a hidden smile. “I can find work for you there.”

“Amreeka? Is that your village, sahib-ji?”

“Get out of here.” He suddenly dismissed me with a curt wave of his hand.

“These beggars make more money begging on the streets than working anywhere.” The waiter chimed in, as though my dismissal required an explanation.
Without a second thought, I grabbed the man’s teacup and downed the hot tea in one
gulp.

“Dirty whore!” The waiter flung the words at me before slapping me squarely in the face.

My cheek burned. I choked back a cough from the hot tea that rushed through my
parched throat, like a fiery rain.

“Ask him for his green notes.” Safia-ji’s voice sounded from behind. “He keeps staring at
your eyes. Make eyes at him, and he’ll give you green notes. Say you want dallas. They’re worth
more than rupees. Much more.”

The man walked towards the side of the stall to where his car was parked. I ran after him.

“Sahib-ji, give me a dallas.” I hoped Safia-ji wasn’t lying.

“Get off the streets. Get a job.” He unlocked his car door, sat inside, rolled his window
down, and held my eyes again. “Smartass, downing my cup of tea.”

He drove away. Neither of us knew that the next time he stared into my cheetah eyes, it
would be on a bed of red roses, his dallas stuffed in my bra.

“You might as well be blind,” Safia-ji croaked as I walked away from the car. “You don’t know
how to use those cat eyes. You could’ve gotten a few more bills out of him.” She hit my head
causing it to bob forward. “He kept staring into your eyes, but you just lowered them like a fool.
Those eyes will get you money in Heera Mandi. Here on the streets you might do better just
rolling them up like you’re blind. Hold onto me here.” Safia-ji placed my hand on her bony
shoulder. “Roll your eyeballs up until you can’t see with them anymore.”

Having been thrown out of Data Darbar, I had no choice but to do as Safia-ji said. It was
either that, or starve to death, or risk being stabbed by beggar-boys if they caught me walking the
streets alone. So I practiced rolling my eyeballs up, but my head tipped backwards so that instead of looking up to make my eyes disappear into my sockets, I peered down. I wished I could just tie my veil around my eyes the way I did whenever Dhaaga and I played a game of hide-and-seek. Safia-ji said this was serious business, not child’s play. Finally she just had me follow her with my eyes clenched. “Get used to walking around blind.”

After hours of forced blindness, Safia-ji and I walked down a dark alley and entered an old building with a dark gray façade. Two flights of narrow, litter-strewn steps led to a betel-juice-stained door, the outside of which was adorned with posters of plump women with brightly painted faces. They were scantily dressed with plunging necklines and creamy, bare legs. I traced my fingers over their legs, leaving brown smudges on them. Safia-ji grabbed my elbow and shepherded me inside. We followed a man dressed in a black shalwar kameez with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder. He had thick sideburns leading to his mouth and a dark voice.

A billow of cigarette smoke escaped with a buzz of male voices in the instant the door to a dark, smoky room was opened. A group of men were seated in the corner, playing cards. Ashtrays containing discarded cigarette stubs were placed near them on wooden side tables. A young girl, long black tresses falling to her tiny waist, served drinks. Safia-ji motioned for me to stand quietly by her side until they acknowledged our presence. She laid out her wad of notes on a table. The man with the rifle licked the tip of his index finger before counting the money. Then he pulled out a few notes from the pile of money and handed them to her.

“Who’s this?” A man wearing a red bandana around his mass of thick black hair looked up from his card game. He wore a tight orange shirt with the sleeves cut off, revealing camel-hump muscles.
“She’s with me.” Safia-ji’s voice quivered. “She can work my corner with me and collect more money.”

A bald man with a small, misshapen nose, who looked as old as Baba, folded his cards and walked to where we were standing. His eyes studied me as if I was a riddle to be solved. With a sudden flick of his fingers that smelled like smoke, he dropped my veil to the floor. I backed away nervously. Safia nudged me forward. His nose twitched, and he pushed me away.

“Smells like a gutter-rat. Where you from? Run away?”

When I spoke, it was in a whisper. “Tobay.”

“Near Jhelum City?” The man raised his bushy eyebrows and stared at my face. My blood dried inside of me. What if he knew my Baba?


His dark eyes cooked me, as if sensing a lack of conviction in my voice. He swiveled his head toward Safia.

“Take her with you. Jhanda will be here tomorrow. Bring her back here then.”

I took staggered steps toward the door, but once we reached the stairs, I ran down, two stairs at a time, afraid that the man might change his mind and order us to come back.

Safia and I walked toward Data Darbar as the muezzin’s call for the evening prayer sounded over the loudspeaker from the roof of the mosque. We walked past the tea stalls, stopping to beg every few yards before reaching Data Darbar. Once we neared the entrance, she motioned with her head for me go inside.

“I thought you slept here.” She pointed at the Darbar.

“This woman chucked me out, saying I was a filthy whore from Heera Mandi.” I answered angrily. “As if I would ever go to Heera Mandi.”
“Why do you think Jhanda’s goon back there wants you washed up? So you can enter a contest for Lahore’s cleanest beggar?”

“I’m not a whore,” I protested. “Begging is different.”

“What’s the difference? Both times you beg for money. Jhanda finds out you’re young, alone here from some village, he sends you to Heera Mandi.”

“You didn’t go there.” I stared at her. “Why should I? I’d rather die than become a whore.” I spat on the pavement.

“Me?” She threw her head back and laughed. “Who’ll take me? My breasts hang down to my ankles.” She shook her breasts that looked like two rats clinging to her body for dear life.

“You’re young. Have you ever been with a man?”

I remembered what Nazo had said about men putting their trunks into women somewhere in their bodies. “I’ve never seen a man’s trunk.”

“Then Jhanda will offer your nath, virginity, to the highest bidder. He can get anywhere from 15,000 to 20,000 rupees. Those eyes will fetch you a good price in Heera Mandi. If the man agrees to a monthly stipend of around 10,000 rupees, Jhanda can have a long-term arrangement for you to entertain only him, no one else. I will get a cut from Jhanda. After all, I brought you to him.” Her eyes danced in their sockets. “We help him, and he rewards us, gives us extra money. Jhanda will make you learn how to dance, too. I know a woman who used to be a dancer in Heera Mandi. One night, a rich Chaudhry took a fancy to her.” Her face broke into a gaping smile, as if one woman’s giant leap into the Chaudhry’s lap was a cause of celebration for all the whores of Heera Mandi. “She lives in Upper-Scotch-Corner now, in a huge bungalow, as his mistress. She even has three children by him, all girls. She said she’s happy she only has girls, because they bring in money. They’re all learning to dance and hope to go to Arab countries as
dancing girls. Maybe she can teach you some dancing, too. She still has her old apartment in Heera Mandi, and sometimes she visits, even holds evenings of dance, where all the best dancers from Heera Mandi come to show their talent.”

“I could never become a dancing girl.” Anger and disgust mingled in my voice. “My Amma used to talk about girls in cities who dance for men and take their clothes off for the men to throw money at them. I don’t need to dance. I have a friend, Dhaaga, who’s in the city, and once I find him, he’ll take care of me. Until then let me stay with you.”

“How are you going to find anyone in this big city?” Her voice was like a fist, freshly banging on my head. “Did he leave any address?”

“No, but I know I’ll see him one day,” I said, wishing that would happen right that very minute. “I know I will. He has to be here somewhere.”

Safia waggled her head and let out a low snicker. “I wish I lived in a big house with servants all around me. You think that’ll come true? Dump your wishes in a ditch, and learn how to feed your stomach. You’re in the city now.”

She would never understand what Dhaaga meant to me, even if I tried to explain. I walked alongside her, thinking if Safia had a reward coming her way for delivering me to Jhanda, I’d be lucky if she let me stay with her for just one night. I could still try. My only other choice would be to sleep in the filthy garbage with rats and dogs chewing on my flesh. My thoughts turned to what she had said about my virginity being sold for 15,000 or 20,000 rupees. I couldn’t even imagine how much money that was, any more than I could understand what selling my virginity meant. But, it made me feel like Bindi. Baba had purchased her for 10,000 or 15,000 rupees. At least she didn’t have to dance for Baba and take her clothes off in front of men, the way Amma said girls in the city did.
Safia’s home was a tent set up on open ground. Waste covered the entire area, and wooden planks were flanked across open sewage drains. Children with dried snot on their faces sat around, playing in the wasteland. They invented games and drew pictures in the dust. Safia stopped in one of the tents where a hollow-cheeked woman lay hacking on a sagging charpai. Safia quietly placed thirty rupees by her side and handed the infant to the sick woman, who put the frail baby next to her shrunken breast. The baby sucked hungrily.

“Business was better today.” Safia stroked the baby’s cheek. “I’ll cook some lentils and send them to you.”

I followed Safia into another tent where a bone-thin, haggard looking man with a scraggily beard lay sleeping with a kind of faint snore, a whistle at the nose. Safia ignored him. She picked some lentils from a small plastic jar and poured water from a bucket into a pot balanced on bricks placed outside the tent. She fetched a few sticks piled inside the tent, placed them under the pot, and started a fire. As the smoke arose, a few women walked over to join her.

“Who’s this?” inquired a shrewish woman, with strands of gray hair peppered with dirt.

“Got kicked out of Data Darbar.” Safia blinked as the rising smoke smarted her eyes.

“But, she’s good for me. Look at her eyes. I knew they’d want her to work in Heera Mandi.”

“You talked to Jhanda?” The woman looked gravely at my cheek as if it held the answer to her question.

“Jhanda will be happy enough,” Safia replied, smiling at me.

What Safia didn’t know was that I had no intention of letting her drag me to Heera Mandi. I still had not forgiven Nazo for tricking me, and I was done with people trying to take advantage of me for their own gain. I would spend the night in Safia’s tent and run away before
she awoke, somewhere far away. Just then the snoring man stirred inside the tent and called out Safia’s name.

“That bastard’s my son Munnoo’s father.” She lifted the tattered flap of the tent and peered inside. “Shoots heroin all day. I’d set up a tent near Mayo Hospital if they’d let me, so that I wouldn’t have to drag his ass there everytime he overdoses. Half my money goes to the rickshaws I hire for him to go that hospital. Wish they’d just keep him there. That would save me a lot of trouble.”

As she spoke, a young boy around nine or ten years old walked over. Strings of mud clenched his face. He was naked from the waist up, ribs jutting out like sugar cane stems the way Dhaaga’s did. His eyes seemed enormous in his thin face. Handing Safia a small wad of notes, he joined a group of boys who sat in the dirt, inhaling vaporized glue.

“Munnoo, you son of a rascal, come back here!” Safia shouted from the tent. Munnoo’s smile cracked the grime on his face as he lost his balance and fell to the ground.

“Next he’ll be shooting heroin like his bastard father.”

That night, I slept inside the tent, cradled in the scrawny lap of exhaustion. Safia laid out an old wicker mat for me on the side of the tent where she kept her plastic jar of lentils and an earthenware jug filled with water. The smell of our unwashed bodies wafted through the tent, nauseating me. I was awakened by a faint scuffing of a body dragging over the mats in the tent. A thin, blurry silhouette crouched beside me, and something pointy and hard poked into the small of my back. A voice sounded faintly in my ear.

“Undo your drawstring, little quail,” Safia’s husband groaned. His hot fetid breath made me pinch my nostrils. “Sshh, you want to stay in my tent, you undo your drawstring.”
I backed away fearfully, realizing what had been poking me in my back. He dragged his body closer, until he had me cornered at the edge of the tent. His fingers fumbled endlessly with my buttons. When he tugged at the drawstring of my shalwar, I delivered a kick to his groin. He howled in pain and curled up, gasping then whining like a wounded stray dog.

Safia awoke, raised her head, and looked over to see what all the commotion was about. She saw her husband lying on the floor, sucking air through his teeth, legs closed together over his hollow stomach.

“Go die, slumdog.” She lifted his hands from his groin area, untying his loincloth to see what was wrong. I endured a disgusting view of the tufts of curly hair matted around a black slimy trunk sticking out from his body like the charred mouthpiece of a hookah.

Safia saw me sitting in the corner, my eyes pleading with her not to hit me. My teeth chattered as my hands reached under my veil to button-up my shirt. The knot on my drawstring had loosened, and I feared that if I stood up, my shalwar might fall down to my ankles.

“He tried to come here, Safia-ji. He… he was trying…” My voice quivered, and I stopped for a moment, trying to control it. “I didn’t do anything. He came after me.”

“You bastard, she’s still a virgin,” she said, her voice cracking. “Leave her alone. I’m taking her to Heera Mandi. You want me to get you money for heroin from Jhanda, you leave her alone.”

“Don’t make me go to Heera Mandi.” I tried to muffle the sobs that were making my body tremble even more. “Let me just stay here until I find Dhaaga.”

She stared at me as if a thought had just crossed her mind, a hyena smile planted on her lips. “You can’t find Dhaaga in this big jungle. You’re from a small village. You go to Jhanda, be a good girl, he’ll help find Dhaaga for you. But, if Jhanda finds out you ran away from him,
he’ll send his goons after your sorry ass, and they’ll find you no matter where you hide. He’ll punish me, too, for letting you get away. He’ll give my corner to some other wretched woman or break my arm. What’ll I do then? You think this rascal slumdog of a husband will put food on the table for me?”

“I’ll beg on the streets then and sleep on the pavement somewhere.” I pleaded with her.

“I’ll hide somewhere. Tell Jhanda I ran away, and you looked everywhere but couldn’t find me.”

“You try begging around here without working for Jhanda, and he’ll make mincemeat out of you. Worse, if somebody sees you sleeping alone on the streets, a young girl, they’ll eat you like wild beasts before the night is over.”

“Can’t I tell Jhanda I’ll work on the streets but not in Heera Mandi? I wouldn’t even know what to do with a man.”

“You’ll learn soon enough,” she grinned, revealing teeth that hung crookedly from her gums. “And with those eyes, Jhanda will sell your virginity at the highest price. But, if you give Jhanda a hard time and refuse to do as he says, he’ll take you to the courts. You want to be stuck in jail?”

“Jail?”

“The law says that a girl accused of illicit sex can be put behind bars. You try to run away from Jhanda, and he’ll take you to court and say they found you in a hotel with a boy. That’s it. He can even say you’re married, produce fake marriage papers and a husband, and you’ll be accused of adultery. Anyway, he knows all the policemen and the jailers. He has his connections.”

I swallowed hard. “I’ll run away from here.” My legs felt shaky as I tried standing up.
Just as quickly, Safia pulled me back down, slabs of foul breath hot on my face. “I’ll take you to Heera Mandi, and I’ll get my share from Jhanda. There are goons hanging around here all night. There’s one with an ear missing, sitting right outside the tent. Jhanda chopped it off when the boy overheard him talking about something to do with drugs, some deal that was going down. You want me to call him in and show you what happens to girls like you when they try to get away? Better still, I’ll show you a girl who sleeps in the tent across from mine. She came from a small town the way you did and ran away from Jhanda. He found her, threw acid on her face. She looks like a witch, face charred to the bone, eyes gone. There’s just a thin layer of skin over where her eyes used to be. He’ll do the same to you. He’ll throw acid on your face and dump your body somewhere.”

I freed my arm from her grasp and ran out. She called out to a group of boys squatting in the dark, inhaling smoke from some kind of a tube, to stop me. One of them, with an ear missing and the other sticking out like the handle of a teapot, slapped me squarely across my face and tore the front of my shirt as the others gathered around. I wrapped my arms around myself and backed away, but there was nowhere to go. He cornered me as I took a few steps towards a tent right behind me.

From inside the tent, a hand, charred and disfigured, grasped my neck. Turning my head to the side, I gasped as a face emerged. The skin was scorched near to the bone, nothing but skin under her forehead led to a flattened nose, the skin overlapping down to her blackened lips. In the moonlight, she looked like a jinn.

I tried to wiggle free from her grasp, but a hand pounded my head against the wooden pole of the tent, yanking my hair out. I screamed in pain and fell to the ground, tears and snot
streaming down my face. The last sound I heard was a voice in the dark asking Safia what all the commotion was about.

“Did something happen to your husband?” A rusty-sounding voice yelled as I lay on the ground, face smeared with dirt.

“I wouldn’t be crying then, you fools!” Her voice coughed out the words. “I’d be celebrating!”
PART THREE

Heera Mandi

From my second floor balcony in the ancient brothel district of Heera Mandi, I watched the sun’s last rays disappear behind the white marbled domes of Mughal India’s most well known and biggest mosque, the Badshahi Masjid. The muezzin’s call for the sunset prayer resounded within the Walled City of Old Lahore, where Heera Mandi, Badshahi Masjid, and the Royal Fort were located. The walls themselves, built by the Mughal emperors who ruled India from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, before the British Raj conquered the land, were gone. But, the thirteen gates that led into the city still remained. Roshnai Gate – the Gate of Light through which Mughal emperors rode on their elephants with an entourage of courtesans and courtiers, en route to worship at Badshahi Masjid – was to the north of Heera Mandi. Bhaati Gate, walking distance from Data Darbar, was to the south.

I had called Heera Mandi home for well over a year now. I made every effort to banish thoughts of my family in Tobay. Sometimes I felt strangely detached from them, as if they were with a part of me that was long gone now. I knew I could never survive in Heera Mandi if I thought of myself as the Mina who lived in Tobay, who had believed that the most shameless act was to lie under a pomegranate tree with Dhaaga on top of me. To think how naïve I was then, believing that was how babies were put in bellies!

My shoddy, airless apartment was on the second floor of a dilapidated four-story building that opened into an enclosed courtyard. I shared it with Minnie, who was around my Amma’s age, and her two daughters Bubbly and Bunty who, like me, worked for Jhanda. Bubbly was a
few years older than me and had large breasts that pointed to the north and hips that swayed from east to west. Bunty, with a thin waif-like figure, was my age.

Bubbly had a beautiful voice and dreamed of becoming a famous singer one day. She took voice lessons from Ustad-ji, a rotund middle-aged man who had a voice that was as syrupy as the thick sugar water he spread over the betel leaves he chewed on all day. He sprinkled white powder and crushed flower petals and colored crystals over each leaf, then wrapped the whole thing into a neat triangle, tucking in the edges, and placed the leaf in his mouth, chewing on it as he played mesmerizing notes on the harmonium and tabla.

He coached Bubbly for three afternoons a week in the living room of our apartment, where he sat cross-legged on the tattered red carpet with a mirrored floor cushion placed under his knotted feet. Weather permitting, I followed Aunty Minnie’s instructions and opened the bamboo-shuttered windows so that Bubbly’s voice could be heard reverberating across the courtyard. Aunty Minnie proudly displayed her daughter’s talent, calling her a beautiful singing nightingale. Jhanda booked traditional singing and dancing performances for Bubbly in a dingy hall in Heera Mandi and boasted of how only the wealthiest of men were invited to listen to the nightingale’s songs.

Bubbly told me that four years ago, when she was twelve, her virginity had been sold to a customer from the Northern Tribal areas, a Pathan with cheetah eyes like mine, but he hadn’t agreed to a long-term contract.

“I fell in love with him that first night,” she told me one evening after her voice lesson had come to a close. “He visited me several times after that, and I became pregnant with his child. My mother was happy, too. She said that might bind him into a long-term contract. Once a girl has a child from a client, he might decide to keep her as his exclusively. He can visit
whenever he wants, and Jhanda gives his word that she won’t look for other clients. But, in my case, he left soon afterwards, and my mother forced me to have an abortion. I keep hoping I’ll find someone else to fall in love with. But, Ma gets so angry. She says I should always remember that this is my profession, and money is the only object. She said if I should dishonor my profession by falling in love, it should at least be with someone rich enough to take care of all our expenses.”

Aunty Minnie never tired of relating how her family belonged to the Kanjar caste of professional courtesans and dancers who had lived in Heera Mandi for centuries, and how her great-grandmother and her mother before her had been among the region’s most well-known courtesans to the wealthy princes of pre-partition India.

“Aunty Minnie sipped sweetened milky tea that I prepared for her several times a day. “My grandmother kept a family ledger with names that dated back to the eighteenth century and included the well-known courtesans of my family.” Aunty Minnie spoke with bits of the betel leaf poking out through the gaps in her teeth. “The women were trained to sing, dance, and read, and they provided graceful companionship to men of nobility whose wives would have considered singing and dancing shameful.”

Aunty Minnie believed that she, too, had aristocratic blood flowing in her veins, for it was believed that Indian princes had fathered many women in her family. She lamented the deterioration of the old havelis, large two-or-three-story houses built around a central courtyard, in Heera Mandi, which was now made up of mostly small, shabby, airless apartments. She would shake her henna-plastered hair, piled in a tight bun on top of her head like a dung patty, expressing disgust at the increasing number of “poor clients with no money or class” and
“whores from dirty villages,” who now infested the once prosperous and most sought-after establishment of Heera Mandi.

Aunty Minnie said Heera Mandi, the Diamond Market, or Shahi Mohalla, the Royal Neighborhood, was aptly named, because of its close proximity to the Emperor’s palace during the Mughal era.

“Ah, Mina, that was the era I should’ve been born into,” Aunty Minnie lamented, her two chins nodding in succession as she stared through kajol-rimmed eyes at the dust-encrusted blades of the ceiling fan whirring overhead, stirring the hot air lazily. Cobwebs drifted back and forth in the corners where the hot air was trapped. “I would’ve lain on a gold bed sprinkled with pink roses, waiting for my prince, young harem girls oiling my hair after bathing me in fresh goat’s milk and dressing me in the finest silks and chiffons brought in from China.”

“And what if his wife entered the room and kicked you out?” I asked, teasingly.

“Who cares about wives?” Aunty Minnie’s pencil-thin eyebrows furrowed, the wrinkles around the sides of her eyes swelling into the tiny tributaries of the Ravi River. “Men spend their nights with us, pay us for our services, and take their dirty underwear home for their wives to wash.” She touched her ear lobes with both her hands and waggled her head. “God forbid I or my daughters should ever get married. We’d have to work hard doing all the housework and listen to our husband’s foul language. What’s the use? Why would I want to suffer like that? My girls and I earn an honest living and don’t have to put up with any husband or in-laws harassing us. I think my life has more dignity than that of a wife who lives like a slave.”

The day after I got beat up by that one-eared rascal outside Safia’s tent, she threw half a bucket of water over my head, telling me to rub the dirt off my face, and gave me a shirt to wear since
mine had been torn up and had mud gummed to it. Then she took me to see Jhanda, but he wasn’t there. We met with Sukho, his transvestite accountant, dressed in a tight-fitting sleeveless satin shalwar kameeze and a flimsy veil slung over his shoulders. His breasts protruded over his low neckline, and his breast-stuffers threatened to fall out as he sat hunched over a big ledger book filled with line after line of heavily inked writing. Jhanda, he informed us, had gone to Dubai with his dancing girls to give live performances for rich Arab sheikhs. He would be flying in that evening. Sukho swallowed an impulse to laugh, winked sweetly, and told the rifled guard to shoo us out of the room.

“By the way, sister, come back sometime, and I’ll show you how to walk properly, not waddle like a duck,” Sukho called out shrilly, as we turned to go. “Oomph, I wish I had those cat eyes.”

Jhanda was a short, balding man with small eyes and a thick black moustache that curled across his chubby cheeks, so that when he let out his raucous laugh, the moustache tickled his ears. He always wore heavily starched white shalwar kameezes that creaked like old wooden doors as he strode past his street beggars, his street policemen, and his Heera Mandi whores with his chest puffed out and his arms pulled back.

Safia delivered me to Jhanda and left saying that if I did as I was told, Jhanda would help me find Dhaaga. As if I was naïve enough to believe that. Even though I knew that I might never see Dhaaga again, stupid as I was, I spent the first few days wishing he would enter Heera Mandi and attend a dance performance and see me sitting there, layers of foundation caked on my face, mascaraed eyes rimmed with kajol, lips and cheeks a shimmery dark pink, and buy my nath, my virginity. But, that never happened. My virginity fetched 18,000 rupees, a transaction that was announced a week after my stay in Heera Mandi.
Jhanda said my buyer was a rich businessman who had seen me sitting at a dance performance with Bunty and Bubbly. Every night for that first week, I fought off sleep and sat up all night for a prospective bidder. Ordinary clients were only allowed between the hours of eleven until one in the morning. After that, the police chucked the ordinary riff raff out, and in rolled the rich clients, high-end politicians and business men in their Land Cruisers.

Bubbly told me that major business transactions were discussed during the dance performances. This, she said, was the place where the powerful relaxed. Confidentiality was a part of our profession. “Ask my mother,” said Bubbly, applying shimmery make up on my eyelids and darkening the pink rouge on my cheeks as I prepared for the businessman who would be my first customer. “She’ll tell you how we Kanjar women have earned the trust of businessmen and politicians, who freely discuss important matters, knowing we would never utter a word to anyone. They’re our richest clients. We’d be fools to lose their trust in us.”

If I pleased him enough, Bubbly said Jhanda hoped to secure a monthly stipend from him, so that he would have exclusive rights to me for as long as he upheld his side of the contract.

That night, Jhanda led me into an airless hotel room with the bamboo shutters closed and a solitary red bulb hanging low from the ceiling. Flecks of white paint were strewn along the cement floor like lice on the heads of beggar children. The business man sat cross-legged on an old bed with a fancy gold headboard, flicking off the dirt between his toes. A large cracked mirror adorned the wall directly facing the bed and a yellow lizard peered from behind it, like a jinn craning his neck to see what I would do next.

As soon as I entered the hotel room, Jhanda stepped out, leaving me at the mercy of my buyer, whispering to me to do all he asked me to. I was so nervous that I forgot all that Bubbly
had said about pleasing him, all the little tips she had handed over to me. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I lowered my head, my hands trembling as I adjusted my veil when he suddenly pounced on me like a hungry, groaning animal. I swallowed hard, not a word escaping from my lips until I screamed in pain as the man ripped off my tight-fitting orange shirt and shalwar. Moments later, I wiped away his sweat and the scraggly hair that had settled on my stomach, arms, legs, and even in my mouth. There was blood on the sheets and in between my legs. I stumbled into the bathroom, drops of my blood dripping onto the broken cement floor. Squatting in the corner of the dingy bathroom, I knew that the Mina from Tobay had died, her soul shattered, and a nameless, dirty whore had come in her place.

Later I heard that the businessman had been disappointed, that even though my eyes had attracted him, I still had a lot to learn and wasn’t worth the monthly stipend that would make me solely his. Aunty Minnie said Jhanda should have waited for me to learn dancing before presenting me to his clients, instead of taking the first offer that came his way.

A month after that, I sat with my legs outstretched on the faded red-brocade covered bed in Jhanda’s hotel room, waiting for my first client of the day. As soon as he walked in, I recognized him. He was the wavy haired, pencil-mustached man I had seen a few months ago, who sat sipping tea near Data Darbar, complaining of beggars, flies, and stray dogs making his life in Pakistan unbearable. I remembered the green note he’d flung at Safia and how he’d told me to find a real job.

I cast my red georgette veil aside, raised my head, and peered at him, fluttering my thick eyelashes the way transvestites did. He smiled at me when I told him, “I took your advice to stop begging and got a real job.”
He was the only client I had who paid Jhanda in *dollars* for my services, so I called him Dallar Man. He said he drove a taxi in America. Not Amreeka. He also said my eyes reminded him of an American actress, Sharon Stone, and he imagined he was with her in Hollywood, when he was really with me in Lollywood. In Heera Mandi.

Dallar Man visited me several times that week and always had an amused air about him, like he walked with an imaginary friend who constantly whispered dirty Punjabi jokes in his ear. He said he had agreed to pay Jhanda 10,000 rupees for the month that he was in Pakistan, so that I could be solely his for that time. His family lived in a house in Gulberg, one of Lahore’s upscale neighborhoods. Dallar Man said that one dollar was worth sixty rupees, and that made his wife and two daughters very happy. I asked him to show me the dollar bill that seemed to make so many people very, very happy. He showed me a five dollar bill and said I could keep it.

And be happy.

“I visit my family every five, six months, once I have enough money saved up,” Dallar Man said, revealing pearly white teeth. He once told me that he had his teeth whitened and also wore green-blue-green lenses in his eyes, because women in America liked his white teeth and green-blue-green eyes against his brewed-Lipton-tea-colored skin. He said he liked to make women smile, any way he could.

“Because,” Dallar Man said, “in America they say happiness comes from inside your heart. ‘Then it must be mighty bloody happiness,’ I joke to American people. And when I have a customer without a smile, I smile and say, ‘Have a nice day, have a nice day.’ Sometimes they smile back and leave a bigger tip.”

When Dallar Man visited Pakistan again after a few months, I greeted him with those four English words: “Have a nice day.” I said the words over and over again as if they held a
great deal of meaning and delight just in themselves. He said I must be as old as his daughter
Faiza and promised that on his next visit, he would bring some books and teach me English.
Dallar Man’s wife in Lahore was so used to spending time alone without him that he often felt as
if he was getting in her way, keeping her from her coffee mornings with Lahori housewives and
her endless shopping at clothing boutiques.

“She told me the children, the cook, and even the milkman were all wondering when I
would go back to America. She said they were just wondering. Wondering, *shundering*, like I
was born yesterday. She just wants my dollars. Maybe I should stop coming to Pakistan.”

One morning, I watched him through the folds of my black burqa as he ate a late
breakfast at a corner restaurant in Heera Mandi. He lifted his fried eggs on to buttered toast and
broke the wobbly egg yolks. Then he spread the yolks evenly over his toast and cut it into neat
little squares that he consumed one at a time with a fork and knife in hand. He said that was his
version of an American breakfast. He was tired of the oily *puris*, curried chick peas, and buttery*
halva* that he ate at the tea stalls near Data Darbar, because he often suffered from indigestion
afterwards.

“Like your hair,” I said. “It’s always oily.”

“No, not oil.” Dallar Man was quick to correct me. “Gel. It’s gel. Can you say ‘gel’?”

Later, seated on my bed in the apartment I shared with Aunty Minnie, Bubbly, and
Bunty, I traced my fingers over the neat pencil moustache that divided his upper lip horizontally
into half. His well-groomed moustache-hair felt smooth like silk, not coarse like those of my
like learning English. Where is America? Near India?”
Dallar Man laughed a great booming laugh until tears dripped down his jawbones. “She says is America near India?” He wiped his eyes with his white handkerchief. “America is too far for you to understand, across oceans and continents. Once you go to America, you’re out of touch with everyone in Pakistan, like you’re in another world. Now in Pakistan, I feel like a foreigner. I look like a Pakistani, but inside, I’m a foreigner.”

I often thought of Dallar Man’s laugh after he had left to go back to America, and a smile stayed in my eyes for a long time. When I was with him, I lived in a world bigger than mine. He split the world into two, the East and the West, and then tried to see how they could be pieced together again. Every time he saw or heard something that reminded him of America, he pointed it out like he had made an important discovery that should be announced on Radio Pakistan.

“When I saw you begging,” he would say, “I thought ‘she smells like a garbage dump, but her Sharon Stone eyes will get her into films.’ Why are yours green and brown and green again? How did that happen? Did you ever wonder? Wonder again.”

With him, I discovered a little magic, as if my soul could escape from my thin, skeletal body into the vast world that was his. I felt like a jinn, released from the pomegranate tree, flying into open spaces, over oceans and continents. I waited for Dallar Man, counted the months, then the days left until his next visit, when he would tell me stories of America, of dishes that washed by themselves in machines, of clothes that washed and were dried automatically, of yellow taxi cabs that roamed streets lined with buildings so high they seemed to touch the sky.

I asked him if he told his wife the same stories, and he said she wasn’t impressed because in her part of Pakistan, in her big house in Gulberg, she had a dishwasher and a washing machine and buildings so high they seemed to touch the sky. Why should she go to America? All she needed was for him to send her the money to keep the servants running her dishwashing and
clothes washing machines, and for her to shop in buildings so high they seemed to touch the sky.

She said her America was right here in Gulberg, thank you very much.

“I like that you’re a foreigner, and that you bring me presents from America,” I said, admiring the green and purple beaded necklace he had bought for me. “Where did you buy this?”

“From a store in the French Quarter of New Orleans, where I live,” he said. “The Quarter’s like a big bazaar, bigger than Anarkali Bazaar, and without heaps of garbage.”

“Let’s go to Anarkali, then,” I said, “and pretend we’re in the French Quarter.”

I stepped into the same shop with the red veil that the scruffy-looking shopkeeper had forbidden me to touch a year ago. That time, Bibi had come to my rescue. I dressed for the occasion and wore a shocking pink organza shalwar kameez with a shiny black purse and high-heeled pointy black shoes and sat down inside the shop, pretending to be with my rich husband Dallar Man.

“Shopping for your daughter’s marriage? Young miss will have Coke, Fanta, 7Up, mango milkshake?” The same shopkeeper gave us his undivided attention.

We pretended to be father and daughter. I suppose a whore from Heera Mandi can be anything: a daughter, a monkey, a maid, or just a whore. I had purposely arrived early, just as the shopkeeper had pulled up his steel shutters, knowing he would consider it bad luck if I, his first customer of the day, didn’t buy anything. That would mean that business would be bad for the rest of the day. I sipped Coke through a paper straw and made him spread out veils of all different colors and material. The more he laid out for me to see, the more I shook my head in discontent and sighed loudly. I pointed at the veils hanging by the front entrance.

“Those,” I said, a smile poised around my lips as I recalled what Bibi had said that day. “They’re all twisted and frayed at the edges like dyed buffalo tails.”
For a moment, the shopkeeper stroked his beard and stared at me. I leaned back in my chair, taking large sips of my Coke. The shopkeeper pointed a thick finger with yellow, uncut nails at the rows of saris tucked away in the corner shelves.

“Your daughter wants to see something else? Saris, maybe? Beautiful chiffon saris I have from China and Dubai. Banarsee from India. More Coke?” He squinted his eyes at me. I wondered whether he was trying to make a connection between buffalo tails and me. What if Bibi entered the shop that very moment and the shopkeeper suddenly remembered who I was? I smiled to myself, thinking I would ask Bibi to sit next to me and order a Coke for him, courtesy of the shopkeeper.

“Ye-hes, more saris.” I placed my hand on Dallar Man’s leg, giving it a little squeeze. He was, after all, my father for the day. Dallar-Daddy Man smiled back weakly and nudged my hand away. I think he wasn’t prepared to buy me saris of all different colors, even if he earned in dollars. Dollars. I thought I would pretend I was from America. “More Coke, please. Cold like in America.” I wiped away imaginary beads of sweat from my forehead. “Okay, show me saris. Chiffon first, then silk. And pack for America.”

“America? I have customers from America buying saris here all the time.” The shopkeeper bared his betel-stained teeth in a half-smile. “All the time. Their favorite is French chiffon in royal blue, baby pink, and parrot green. Here, I’ll call my young boy to put the saris on for you to see. Which ones do you want to see, please, miss, young, young miss? You pay in dallar? I take dalls. No problem.”

I looked into the shopkeeper’s eager eyes, lifted my shiny black bag, and placed it closer to where he was sitting cross-legged on the flat wooden platform, surrounded by saris laid out for me to see. I smiled.
“Dallar? Yes, my daddy here only uses dallars.” I pointed my finger, tipped with long, lacquered nails, at the shopkeeper. “Now, you wear the sari and show it to me.”

“Bring me the honey-yellow one,” said the shopkeeper. The young boy pulled out a silk sari from a shelf and handed it to him. “For young miss, this will look good with your eyes and your golden-American hair.”

I flicked my bleached hair over my shoulder and stared at Dallar-Daddy. He had no clue why I was taking so long to decide. The shopkeeper stood up on the platform and wrapped the sari around his protruding belly, taking the pallu, the end cloth, and flinging it over his left shoulder.

“Turn around for me.” I smiled a half-smile the way Dhaaga used to, baring only half his teeth. Watching him twirl unsteadily around the shop was more than entertainment than I could ask for. How could he have dared shoo me away from his shop last time? As if beggar girls didn’t have any honor. Shame on him.

After a while, I asked him to pack the French chiffon saris, the kind that he had just shown me, in baby blue, parrot green, pigeon-blood red, and lemon yellow. He packed them and handed the Dallar Man, my daddy for the day, the bill.

Dallar-Daddy scratched his left ear, casting an anxious glance my way. I shook my head sadly, slung my black glossy handbag over my shoulder, straightened my golden-American hair, and told the shopkeeper I had changed my mind.

“Have a nice day,” I said in English and stepped out of the store.
In between Dallar Man’s visits, I stayed busy most afternoons practicing the *Kattakh* dance for my nightly performance with Bubbly, Bunty, and Peeru, our new transvestite teacher.

Peeru was in his twenties and always had his hair plastered with henna and piled on top of his head. Most days, his face was freshly shaven, but occasionally black stubble showed beneath his cakey foundation.

“Eye movement,” he would say in a high-pitched voice, looking sideways, his pupils dilated. Then they got narrower as he moved them to the corners of his eyes. They widened again until we were sure his eyeballs would pop out.

Peeru would instruct us to watch him closely as he shook his six layers of ankle bells and swayed his thick hips, flashing coquettish glances at us that made us collapse into giggles.

“Aunty Minnie, all these girls think I’m a joker,” Peeru said one day during our dance practice. He flicked his hair over his shoulder, picked his flimsy yellow veil off the floor, and headed toward the door in tears. “*Bus*, that’s it. I’ll tell Jhanda I can’t come where people are calling me a joker. *Bus*, I’m finished.”

“Hai-hai, don’t mind these silly girls, Peeru.” Aunty Minnie glanced angrily at us. “They’re just jealous. Your breasts are double the size of theirs. At least teach Bubbly and Bunty. Mina can wait until next time. Bubbly has her singing lesson today, too, so hurry up before Ustad-ji comes.”

Aunty Minnie always made it a point to ask Peeru to coach her daughters while I sat massaging her chubby feet or oiling her coarse hair. I tried telling myself that it wasn’t as if I really needed to be a good dancer to secure more clients. Rolling my cheetah eyes at them was
enough to make them open their wallets and throw a few rupees my way. I doubted whether most of our clients had extra money to spare even if we perfected our dance routines. I still felt left out though, when Bunty and Bubbly twirled around the living room as I sat massaging Aunty Minnie’s feet. Finally, one day, after our practice session came to a close, and I had missed yet another day of dance practice, Peeru pulled me aside.

“I’ll take you to my apartment, and you can meet my sisters.” He grabbed my arm and led me to the stairs outside our apartment, away from Aunty Minnie, who sat sipping her sweetened milky tea. “We’ll teach you dancing that you’ve never seen before.” Peeru traced his thick fingers over my face and looked into my eyes. “Bunty and Bubbly won’t know what happened, and that fat old cow Minnie will have the shock of her life when she sees you dance the best at the big performance in two months.” He led me down the spiral staircase. “Jhanda said a wealthy Arab sheikh will be there, and you’ll shine, Mina. I’ll tell Aunty you’ll be back tonight.” He left me at the bottom of the stairs and ran up to tell Aunty our plans.

“As if she cares.” He ground his hips all the way back down the stairs. “If it wasn’t for that pompous pimp Jhanda, Minnie the old cow would have thrown you out long ago. I told her I wanted to show your eyes, so beautiful, to my sisters.” He stepped outside, dodging a speeding blue and white rickshaw that roared past us. “Your long, shiny, sometimes golden, sometimes black hair will make my sisters at the brothel so jealous.”

“I once met an old transvestite in Tobay—Bibi,” I said, following Peeru down a narrow alley, the sun’s rays filtering through spaces between rows of dark, drab apartments with gray facades. “I saw him again near Data Darbar. He really stuck up for me that day, even told me to visit him at the brothel. He had a green veil for me, he said, that would match my eyes.”
“You know Bibi?” Peeru said, tossing his hair over his shoulder. “Bibi only talks about Tobay and Jalalpur Sharif. If you have the patience to listen, he’ll talk your ear off.”

I smiled at Peeru, thinking of how I should have visited Bibi earlier. The thought had occurred to me, but I had been busy settling into my new life in Heera Mandi. I also knew that Aunty Minnie, Bubbly, and Bunty would have laughed in my face if I had asked them to accompany me to a transvestite brothel. “As if we would ever step into such a lowly place,” they would have said. “We’re Kanjar women. We would never enter a dirty transvestite brothel with all those vulgar ladyboys thinking they can compete with us!”

“Who’s this?” I stopped to stare at a gigantic poster of a young warrior in a dark gray armor suit, holding a pistol across his breast and a bayoneted rifle at his side as he straddled his black stallion.

“This film’s been playing for two months now.” He hoisted up his bra. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen it yet?”

“What’s it called?” I asked, excited at seeing a handsome warrior sitting atop his horse.

“Sikander the Great.” Peeru winked at the gigantic poster and puckered his lips, blowing out a kiss. “Sikander looks so shweet in his skirt. Look at those hairless pink legs. He must have applied shimmery powder, like I do, see?”

He pulled up his shalwar to reveal his shaved muscular legs with dark stubble covered in shimmery powder that glowed like morning dew on blades of thick, trimmed grass.

“I knew a boy called Sikander the Great,” I said, staring at the poster, imagining Dhaaga straddling the black stallion. “He’d ride Bindi, our buffalo, and pretend he was King Sikander riding his warrior horse, Bucephalus.”
“Where’s your Sikander now?” Peeru twisted a loose strand of his hennaed hair. “Is he in Tobay?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “He ran away to Lahore. He used to dream of becoming a police officer in the city.”

Peeru laughed, almost stepping on a rat that suddenly emerged from a sewage drain and skittered past us. “Boys from villages don’t become officers in big cities.”

Peeru held my hand, dodging traffic as we crossed the street leading toward Melody Cinema. He winked at a group of young men drinking tea at a roadside stall, adjusting his bra as we walked past them. The men laughed and continued their conversation.

“Peeru,” I said, imitating his hip-gyrating walk under the folds of my burqa, which made my glass bangles jingle on my arms. “It’s not fair that you get to walk any way you want and wear flimsy veils, whereas I have to be properly covered every time I leave my apartment so that they don’t call me a dirty whore.”

“So?” He cocked his head at me. “They call me names, too, but I don’t care.”

“You don’t care when they point fingers and laugh at you?” I remembered all the times he had cried and run out the door when we laughed at him twirling around in Aunty Minnie’s apartment.

“They’ve been laughing at me ever since I was born.” He pouted, flicking loose strands of hair over his shoulder. “My parents were so embarrassed of me I had to flee my village.”

We walked past Melody Cinema, with motorcycles and rickshaws veering around us, and stepped into the shadow of a dark alley, stopping before a three-story apartment building with a gray facade. A faded white door with rusted iron hinges led into a small, enclosed courtyard. Charpais were placed near a slowly rotating pedestal fan with dust-encrusted blades that stirred
the stifling air, clicking softly as it turned, bringing some relief from the stuffy humidity of the monsoon season.

“Mina, come over and meet Bibi.” Peeru led me to Bibi, who lay sprawled on his sagging, rope-strung wooden charpai, dressed in a shimmery purple shalwar kameez. Strands of curly gray hair poked out of his low neckline.

I recognized him, his kind face with a smile radiating across his wrinkles.

“I remember you.” Bibi leaned forward on the charpai, puffing on an earthenware hookah, the kind that Baba had. “I went back to the bazaar looking for you, so I could give you the green veil I promised, but I never saw you again.” He glanced at me. “Your house was the last one I ever entered in Tobay, but that day at Data Darbar, you seemed so scared to visit mine. You’re not scared to visit a transvestite brothel anymore?”

“Nothing scares me now, Bibi,” I said, squatting by his charpai. “Not even gruffy, old shopkeepers with frayed veils resembling buffalo tails.” I lowered my head and giggled, thinking of the day I had spent with Dallar Man, pretending I was his daughter visiting from America. I related the whole incident to Bibi, with the shopkeeper who had gone from throwing me out to twirling around in saris for me to see. “He thought I was a rich girl from America and was determined to sell me his entire stock, but I left empty handed, to his dismay!”

“Good for you, child.” Bibi’s eyes sparkled. He laughed softly. “Peeru, go into my room. There’s a dark green veil lying in the top drawer, I think. You know where my veils are in all those drawers. Fetch the one with the gold border.”

Peeru slipped through a side door and, after a few minutes, emerged with the green veil in his hand. The rich, dark color reminded me of the leaves on the peepal tree that grew by the back wall of our house in Tobay. I took off my burqa and folded it, placing it under Bibi’s charpai,
and draped the gold-bordered veil over my head and my shoulders. This was the first time anyone had ever presented a gift to me. Dallar Man brought over small gifts from America, but they came at a price. Bibi wanted nothing from me. At least, I hoped he didn’t.

Adjusting the veil across my chest, I became conscious of not wearing a bra under my shirt and folded my arms across my chest, hiding my breasts, the size of ripe guavas. Then I unfolded my arms. As if the transvestites, even old Bibi, really cared whether I was wearing a bra or not.

“Come closer.” Bibi motioned with his fingers. “I remember your cat eyes, the color of my mother’s eyes. I bought a green veil for her when I had some money saved up from sewing shoes for the old cobbler in our village. The veil cost six rupees back then. That was what I earned that entire month, working from dawn till dusk. I was so clumsy, kept poking myself with that fat needle in my hand.” Bibi rubbed his knobby hands across his jawbone. “After that first month, the old cobbler sent me home.”

A few younger transvestites, seated cross-legged on colorful mirrored floor cushions in a corner of the enclosed courtyard, came over to meet me.

“I know her.” A slim transvestite with long bleached hair and finely chiseled features looked me over as if a rare joke had been passed. “She works for that pimp, Jhanda. Oh God, but she can’t dance. Like a stiff sugarcane stem… oof! So scared to sway her hips!”

“She’s young and from a small village,” Peeru said, coming to my defense. “Give her time.”

“I bought my mother gold-speckled, green glass bangles, too, to match the veil,” Bibi told us wistfully, ignoring the transvestites as his sunken gray eyes focused only on me. “That was the only present I ever gave her after I ran away to the transvestite brothel.” Bibi’s lower lip
“My father forbade me from visiting her ever again, said I had tarnished the family’s honor and should stay put with the transvestites in our village.” He shook his head. “I left the bangles by the front door and knocked a few times, then ran and hid behind a mud wall, hoping to catch a glimpse of my mother when she opened the door to see who was outside.”

“Did she pick the bangles up?” I edged forward, eyes glued to Bibi.

“Aye hai.” A trail of smoke escaped from Bibi’s mouth. “My father came dawdling down the dirt trail by our house. I crouched even lower.”

“Then?”

“Bibi!” Peeru’s shrill voice sounded from behind me, and I almost jumped up. “We’ve all heard this story a thousand times over!”

“Shush, Peeru,” Bibi said, waving him away. “Mina hasn’t. She was so kind to me the day my mother died. So, I was saying, my father picked up the brown bag with the bangles in it, looked around as if he suspected someone might be watching him. Then he walked into the house.”

“And your mother wore the green bangles, knowing they must’ve been from you,” I said, eyes widened.

“I don’t know.” Bibi shook his head. “I wonder now whether I should’ve left the bangles out there in the first place. My father might’ve accused my mother of… knowing some other man. Maybe I got her into trouble.”

“Your mother and father are long gone, now,” called out a younger transvestite who sat nearby, applying shimmery red nail polish to his long toenails. “Let their dry bones rest in peace.”
“When did you last see your mother alive?” I remembered how the skin under Bibi’s eyes had appeared bruised from crying the day he had entered my house. “You had just buried her the time I met you in my house.”

“The last I saw my mother’s eyes, there were tears rolling down them.” Bibi wiped away tears with the back of his hand. “Growing up, I’d drape my mother’s colorful veils across my shoulders to brighten up the drab boy’s clothes I had to wear. My father was furious and dragged me by my hair all the way to Baba Jamal-ud-din.” He leaned forward on the charpai, sucking on the mouthpiece of his hookah. “My father was convinced someone had performed black magic on me, his only son.”

I glanced around, wondering how many of the transvestites had been banished from their homes, knowing they could never return. I felt a kinship with them. They were outcasts like me.

“My father believed Murad’s wife had performed black magic on me because she had given birth to two girls the year I was born and had another one the following year.” Bibi let out a low snicker. “My father slaughtered three black chickens in my name to ward off the evil eye of envy, but nothing worked. The next time he took me to the village barber to get my hair cut short, I cried. My father was convinced then that there was a jinn inside my body, coaxing me to behave like a girl.” Bibi smiled weakly. “He instructed Mullah Jamal-ud-din to beat me with his bamboo stick to banish the evil spirit from my body. I still have marks on my back from the beating I received.”

“Bibi, why do you keep telling us stories that make you cry?” Peeru, who had been watching the young transvestite apply nail polish, walked over and sat by Bibi’s feet on the charpai. He bent over to give the mouthpiece of the hookah to Bibi.
“I’m telling Mina,” Bibi said, his voice quiet but sharp. “If none of you want to listen to my story, you don’t have to. You treat me like I’m dead already.”

“Bibi, I want to listen to your story.” I patted Bibi’s creased hand gently thinking how old and marred by the past he was. “And you better have time to listen to mine,” I said, thinking whether I should tell him of the time I believed the jinn from the pomegranate tree had followed Dhaaga and me home.

“That night after the beating, I climbed over the mud wall around Baba Jamal-ud-din’s courtyard when he went to the mosque to pray and managed to run to the transvestite brothel in Tobay. They couldn’t believe their eyes when I entered that ladyboy brothel. My back was all bloody from that whipping.” Bibi’s eyes were wet. “They feared the mullah would create trouble for the ladyboys if he found out I was hiding there, so they hid me in the next closest brothel in Jalalpur Sharif.”

“I know where Jalalpur Sharif is,” I said, eagerly. “It’s near Tobay.”

“I know you’re from Tobay, but I still don’t know who your father is,” Bibi said, puffing on his hookah.

“Farid Jawad,” I said, suddenly realizing how long it had been since I had spoken of him or said his name.

“You have my mother’s eyes. Who knows, we might be related, heh heh.” Bibi’s hoarse laugh erupted into a hacking cough. Peeru stood up to fetch him a glass of water from the earthenware jug in the corner of the courtyard. “After all, how many people do you know who have eyes like yours? No wonder I remembered you after all this time. But, tell me about Tobay.” He took a small sip of the water. “I remember the pomegranate trees, how we used to suck their juice and throw the empty pomegranates into the stream and watch them bobbing
away in the water.” Bibi handed the glass back to Peelu. “And we’d run after bullock carts carrying sugarcane and steal as many as our hands could carry. Then sit under the shade of the peepal tree near the mosque and suck out the sugary juice.”

“The stream and the pomegranates and the sugarcane are still there in Tobay.” Hot tears stung my eyes. “Only unlucky people, like you and me, can’t see them anymore.”

“Hush, child.” He caressed my cheek, his hands warm and rough. I felt their thin bones against my fluttering eyes. “Come sit on the charpai with Bibi. Tell me how you came to Lahore. I saw you at the shop that day and thought, ‘She doesn’t know the rules of the streets. She thinks shopkeepers will let her, a beggar girl, into their shops!’”

I told Bibi how Nazo had tricked me into leaving. Bibi listened quietly, a sad expression on his face.

“Bibi, you’re too tired now,” Peelu spoke gently, positioning a thin pillow under Bibi’s head. “I’ll bring Mina back some other time to talk more about Tobay.”

Peelu whispered for me to leave so that Bibi could rest. “It’s getting late. I better walk with you back to Aunty Minnie’s apartment.”

“Peelu,” I said, as I closed the creaky wooden door behind me, “listening to Bibi’s stories, I felt as if I was back in Tobay listening to Ma-ji. As if I had never left Tobay and never set foot in Heera Mandi. I wish I’d come here sooner.”

Peelu smiled and held my hands in his. “Bibi has a lot of stories to tell,” he said. “No matter how many times you come back, Bibi will have a new story each time.”

A clap of thunder sounded, and the monsoon rains broke, sending everyone running for cover. Peelu and I hurried down the alley as fat drops of monsoon rain pelted against the drab walls of apartment buildings with a hollow slap. A crowd of people clambered, as we did, toward
Melody Cinema, hoping to find cover from the heavy gusts that rattled the shutters of tea stalls and tossed plastic chairs around before the drenched workers had a chance to save them. Plastic bags whipped back and forth from the mounds of rubbish lying on the streets and got lodged in the lattice of telephone wires above us.

Within seconds, young boys undressed, throwing their tattered shalwar kameezes aside as they splashed in the huge puddles of rainwater, rubbish, and sludge that lapped around their tiny waists. Peeru crouched beside the front entrance wall of Melody Cinema, squealing about his ruined makeup.

“Forget your makeup,” I said, pulling his hands away from his face. “Nobody cares what you look like right now. Whenever it rained in Tobay, Dhaaga would be out on the street, splashing around in the water. I’d just watch from my house, wishing I could be there with him. Come on, Peeru. Who can stop me now? I’m going to dance in the rain.”

Peeru refused to budge, but then he took my hand in his and ran out in the street. Facing skyward, he let the warm, monsoon rain wash away his layers of foundation. My soaked burqa clung to my skin as I spread my arms outwards like a bird in flight and splashed in the muddy water thinking of the time I had splashed around with Dhaaga in the stream.

As the storm passed, the streets of Heera Mandi were left a stinking, muddy mess. Peeru and I hurried back to Aunty Minnie’s apartment, trying to avoid walking through the washed up sewage from overflowing drains that left a foul stench in the air.

“Maybe Dhaaga was splashing around in the rain, too,” I said. “Maybe he was thinking of the time we had splashed around in the stream, too. Or, maybe, he’s forgotten all about me.”

“I’ll take you to see Sikander the Great tomorrow.” Peeru cupped his hands over his face as a few men walked by. “And you can imagine you’re back in Tobay with Dhaaga. Now let’s
hurry up before someone catches me without any make-up on my face and mistakes me for a boy.”

I saw *Sikander the Great* eight times until Peeru was sure I had gone mad. I told him that I went because, apart from the memories it brought back of my time with Dhaaga, there was a hundred percent chance that Dhaaga would go see the movie if he was in Lahore. Peeru and I hung around Melody Cinema for hours in the hot sun, before the three o’clock showing. There was never any sign of Dhaaga.

A few times, I chased after young skinny boys, thinking one of them might respond to his name. But, although they stopped to stare at the girl in a burqa and the young transvestite in hot pursuit of a piece of string, none turned out to be Dhaaga.

Peeru refused to accompany me to the movie after the eighth time, saying he was tired of tripping on his high heels while chasing scrawny boys. At one point, almost all the stuffing in his bra popped out, and I had to walk all the way back to the transvestite brothel with him as he complained about his lopsided breasts.

Bibi sat cross-legged on the charpai, filling the base of his hookah with tobacco and brown sugar as we entered the courtyard. Some of the transvestites lay on floor cushions and giggled, pointing their thick, lacquered fingers at Peeru’s breasts. Peeru tried covering his lopsided breasts with his flimsy veil and ran into his bedroom in tears.

“All your fault!” He pointed a finger my way.

“Peeru, what happened?” Bibi called out, hushing the transvestites who wouldn’t stop laughing.
“We went to watch a film at Melody Cinema, and she made me chase after scrawny boys.” He ran into his bedroom as the other transvestites doubled over with laughter, calling out to him in their shrill voices.

“The last film I watched was Rambo,” Bibi said. “Now, no one takes me anywhere. They think I’m an old buffalo, all milked out.”

“Bibi,” I said, sitting at his feet, gently rubbing my hands over them, “maybe you and I can go. The film’s about Sikander the Great. You must know he buried his horse in Jalalpur Sharif.”

“Maybe you can take me to see a film about a warrior horse buried in my village,” Bibi suddenly spoke up. “We always heard stories in our village about Sikander and his brave horse.”

I helped Bibi into his bedroom, promising to take him to a showing of Sikander the Great after my dance practice with Peeru the following day.

Peeru pouted at me when I opened the door to Aunty Minnie’s apartment the next day. He smiled only when I told him that even with lopsided breasts he still looked prettier than any of the other transvestites.

“They’re jealous because your breasts are so pointy and big like the Himalayan mountain peaks,” I said, not knowing exactly what to say. “They’re just jealous, and you know that.”

He hoisted up his breasts even further, heaving his chest up and down like a Punjabi film actress. That day, Aunty Minnie had a headache and stayed in her bedroom, while Bunty and Bubbly complained of their feet aching from a long shopping trip to the bazaar. Peeru and I left early and entered the transvestite brothel where Bibi sat dressed in a bright orange chiffon sari and matching lipstick.
“She’s going to make you chase after young boys and scream out ‘Dhaaga, Dhaaga’ every time a skinny boy walks by,” Peeru protested, but Bibi just laughed.

“I couldn’t run even if she begged me to,” he said, furrowing his gray eyebrows. “So you’re still searching for your Dhaaga.”

“He was the only friend I ever had,” I said, walking out of the courtyard holding Bibi’s hand. I noticed his tight-fitted orange sandals cut into his swollen, knotted feet.

Bibi had more energy than I imagined and walked at a faster pace than most people his age.

“I was a dancer my whole life.” He winked as we approached the cinema house. “This body has grown old, but the spirit of a dancer keeps it from falling apart.”

I found a bench for Bibi to sit on as I went to the ticket booth to purchase tickets for the 3:30 showing, half an hour later. Bibi sat patiently, watching me ogle young, skinny boys through the two eye-slits in my burqa. Once we walked inside the cinema house, Bibi patted my hand.

“That boy must be very important to you,” he whispered. “He must be more than just a friend.”

“He meant everything to me,” I said, suddenly wishing I could hear his voice. “The night he fled Tobay, I lost everything. I lost myself.”

“And if you meet Dhaaga, it would be as if you’d found yourself again,” he said, wrapping his sari around him. “I knew no one when I came here. And I missed everyone. Most of all, I missed my mother. Sometimes I would walk the streets like you are now, hoping my mother might have come to the city looking for me.”
“Now you know someone from Tobay, Bibi,” I whispered as the film began to roll, and Sikander appeared larger than life on the big screen. “You know me.”

Bibi took my hands in his and squeezed them. “And if we meet your Dhaaga, that would make it two,” he spoke, his voice quivering in the dark.

“Ameen,” I said as Sikander’s horse Bucephlas sprung in the air on all fours, ready to take on mighty elephants that could trample it within seconds. But, this was Bucephalus, and he was mightier and braver than all the elephants in all of India.

Bibi grabbed my hand when Sikander’s horse succumbed to his wounds and let out a muffled sob. “This must be in Jalalpur Sharif.” His voice broke. “To think that warrior horse is buried there.” He clutched my hand tighter.

We watched the rest of the movie in silence and once it was over, Bibi and I waited patiently for people to file out of the cinema house. Then we walked outside, Bibi holding my hand for support. A few boys teased him, pointing at him, asking him where his burqa was. Bibi ignored their comments and even smiled back weakly.

“Boys like them have nothing better to do,” he said later as we walked back. “Making fun of an old transvestite is their way of feeling tall and proud.”

We stopped to buy fresh jellabis from the jellabiwalla who fried the crispy, sugar-filled pretzels in pink oil. Bibi paid for the jellabis and handed me the brown bag dripping with oil.

“I can’t eat these,” he said. “They get stuck in the few rotten teeth I have left. The sweet jellabis are for you for taking old Bibi to see a film.”

The jellabis were hot and sweet, just the way I liked them. I munched on them all the way to the transvestite brothel, thinking of the times Baba would bring me fresh jellabis on his way home from the Friday prayer. Bibi talked seamlessly the entire way, again telling me how word
had been sent out to him that his mother had died and how his father had instructed for him to stay away and not let his mother’s name be tarnished at her own funeral.

“When I die, no one from Tobay will cry for me.” His voice faded away as we entered the brothel, and I helped Bibi take off his orange sandals and sit on the charpai in the courtyard. “If only Allah could’ve made me into a girl. I would’ve lived with my mother, then married, had children of my own.” Bibi clicked his tongue wistfully. “They would’ve remembered Bibi. I would’ve lived on in my children’s hearts the way my mother lives on in mine.”

“You’ll live in my heart, Bibi,” I said softly.

Bibi stroked my cheek. “Maybe you can be the daughter I never had.” His trembling hands cupped my face, and eyelids flickering, he gazed into my eyes. He pulled me closer, wrapping his frail arms around me. “The only person who showed any respect for me when I danced was the Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif. The others laughed at a ladyboy dancing like a girl, but he never did.” Bibi’s eyes held a faraway look. “The Chaudhry’s eyes lit up when I dressed in my ghagra and twirled around the room with leather cuffs strapped to my ankles, each with six rows of brass-bells. Those thick cuffs left my ankles sore for days.”

I pulled away from Bibi. “You knew the Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif?”

“Yes, yes,” Bibi absently sucked on his tooth and looked off into the distance as if trying to remember something. “The Chaudhry saw me dancing one night at the brothel in Jalalpur Sharif. Then he visited again and again. I would dance for him all night.” Bibi straightened his back. “I was his favorite girl, he said, and I was born to dance only for him.”

“And he had a tailor?” The words tumbled out of my mouth, unchecked.

“Ah, Master Sohna we called him.” Bibi smiled. “Jalalpur Sharif is a small village. Master Sohna was a young tailor then. But, the Chaudhry ordered him to only stitch clothes for
him and his family.” Bibi leaned back in the charpai and closed his eyes, and I feared he might be asleep already. “How did you hear about the tailor?” He cracked his eyelids. “I didn’t know people in Tobay knew about him.”

“My mother told me one time, I think…” I made sure to leave Dhaaga’s name out of the conversation. What if the Chaudhry visited Bibi and found out I had been asking questions about a man the Chaudhry’s son had killed all those years ago?

“The tailor sewed the most exquisite ghagras for me.” Bibi sat up, sucking on the mouthpiece of the hookah that lay by his side. The sweet smell of brown sugar and tobacco bubbled through the water at the base of the long pipe. “I was the Chaudhry’s favorite dancer, and he liked to spoil me, if you know what I mean. I keep the ghagras locked in my steel trunk.” Bibi lowered his voice. “Otherwise all the sisters here will steal them from me.”

“And have you heard anything about this tailor, whoever he was, after all these years?” I tried not to sound too eager.

“The Chaudhry said Master Sohna came home one day to find his wife in the arms of her lover.” Bibi shook his head, letting a trail of smoke waft my way. “In a fit of rage, he set the whole house on fire, burning himself, his wife, and her lover.”

“Did they have any children?” I twisted the ends of my veil, carefully avoiding Bibi’s eyes.

“A young son, I believe.” Bibi furrowed his eyebrows. “Of course, when I danced for the Chaudhry, the tailor was a young man, not married as yet. So I never met the son. They say once the house caught on fire, they found the child collapsed in the courtyard but still breathing. Someone saved him from the fire and took him to their home, but he ran away somewhere. No one’s heard from him since. I’ve been away from Jalalpur Sharif for so long now, these are just
stories I’ve heard. The Chaudhry joined politics soon after I started dancing for him, and he spent most of his time in Lahore. Eventually he settled me here in the brothel. He couldn’t keep me in his house. You know how it would look for a senator to have his dancing ladyboy living in his house!” Bibi laughed softly.

“The Chaudhry is a senator?” My eyes widened. “Here in Lahore?”

“Now running his son in election for the post of the Chief Minister of Punjab,” said Bibi. “Everyone in Heera Mandi knows if they say anything to Bibi, they have the Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif to answer to.” Bibi draped a sheet over his body, his eyes nearly closed.

Full dark had fallen, and a hazy moon stood above a bank of clouds as I left the brothel. I knew I couldn’t trust Bibi with anything concerning Dhaaga.
“Peeru’s teaching you to dance.” Bibi rested spraddle-legged in his charpai when I visited him again after a few days. “Maybe that’s something I can teach you to do, Kattakh and Bharatanatyam.” He sat with his knotty hands in fists on his knees. “Ever since we talked about my dancing days, I thought, let Mina visit and let me show her the Bharatanatyam. Most girls in Heera Mandi perform the Kattakh, so you’ll be a step above them if you perform the Bharatanatyam at the big performance coming up.”

Heaving himself up from the charpai, he gestured for Peeru to fetch his leather cuff anklets. Peeru wrapped the thick cuffs around Bibi’s ankles, being careful not to tie them too tightly.

“Peeru, how can I dance if my anklets hang loosely around my ankles?” Bibi said, planting his wrinkled hands on his waist. “I was taught to tie them tight because the restraint would remind me I was performing.”

As Peeru tightened the anklets, some of the younger transvestites dragged their mirrored floor cushions to where Bibi now stood, six-layered brass bells firmly around his thin ankles, waiting for Peeru to fetch the dholak.

Peeru sat cross-legged on the crumbling cement floor and started playing a beat on the dholak. Bibi sucked in his breath then bent forward, touching the floor and then his eyes. Then he looked straight at me. “You must always ask Bhuma Devi, the goddess of the earth, for permission to pound her ground with your feet.” Bibi then struck his bare feet on the floor, ankle bells chinking in a calculated rhythmic pattern that kept in tune with the sharp beat of the dholak. His loosely braided hair fell around his shoulders as he raised his arms upwards and twirled
around the courtyard, feet moving faster and faster. He was transformed from an old transvestite into a light, beautiful feathered bird. Sweat trailed down his forehead and upper lip, shimmering in the evening light like sequins on a veil.

Then, as suddenly as he had started whirling around the floor, he stopped, collapsing on the charpai amidst a thunderous roar of applause from his admirers. They hooted and hollered out his name, their high-pitched voices colliding with the muezzin’s call for the nighttime prayer.

“This is how you should dance,” Bibi said, choking on his words. His frail hands reached down from the charpai and clasped mine. I noticed his veins, prominent with sparse gray hairs growing over them, like withered grass growing in a dry stream that once carried swift, clear water.

“Bharatanatyam,” he whispered softly, his face creased with pleasure, “is a fire dance, so your movements must resemble those of a dancing flame.” Bibi clasped his palms together and extended them upwards. He maintained the position then gradually lowered his arms. “In Hindu mythology, the whole universe is the dance of the Supreme Dancer, Nataraja, a name for Lord Shiva. When you dance, your eyes must always be focused toward the Supreme Lord.” Bibi’s eyes opened wide, like an old lion alert to lurking danger, and he stared skyward. I followed his gaze.

“Local kings would invite local devadasis, temple dancers, to their courts. That is how a new category of dancers, rajanarthakis, was created. A devadasi had to surrender to the Lord and was allowed to dance only in sacred Hindu ceremonies, but rajanarthakis danced for pure entertainment. Now stand up, Mina, and watch my steps carefully.”

Bibi heaved himself up from the charpai and instructed another dholak player, an aged transvestite with long and thinning gray hair with ends that had been hennaed a bright red, to
play a soft, slow beat. As he coaxed and kneaded the skin head of the dholak, Bibi bent his torso forward, gracefully lifted his left leg, and bent it upwards, holding it steady with the palm of his outstretched arm. The palm of his other hand faced outwards, and his eyes were focused upwards. His hips swayed gently but firmly from side to side, like a dancing flame.

I danced behind Bibi, closely following his instructions. My thighs burned as Bibi had me stand with my arms outstretched while balancing on one bent leg and then the other. Some of the other khusras sat nearby, and a few acted jealous, as if Bibi had betrayed them by teaching me. I knew the prostitutes of Heera Mandi made fun of the khusras and thought of them as lower than them in status. It was no wonder that some of them didn’t want Bibi teaching me how to dance.

“Aye, Bibi,” called out a slim transvestite with bleached hair in a bun on top of his head. “You tell us you’re too old to dance, but for this dirty whore, you do anything.” The transvestite cocked his head to the side, crinkling his nose as if I gave off an offensive odor. “We’re your children, you tell us, and now look who you take in as your daughter. A slut like her makes fun of us when we walk by the roadside. As if they would ever teach us anything. We’re nothing but wretched jokers to them.” He adjusted his flimsy yellow veil over his left shoulder and turned around to exit from the courtyard.

Bibi stopped dancing and called out to the younger transvestite, his voice hoarse as he tried to catch his breath, which came in short gasps.

“Bano, quiet now.” Bibi’s voice quivered. “What has Mina ever done to you, huh? She spends all this time with me, and all of a sudden you act jealous.” He sipped some water from a steel glass placed by the charpai. “No one bothered asking me to teach them to dance or to hear my stories about Jalalpur Sharif. Mina wants to learn. She’s all alone, like I was when I came here all those years ago. Look at her eyes. Those big cat eyes will fetch her money. Eyes, Mina,
eye movements are so important in this dance. There are eight eye movements of *Bharatanatyam* that you must learn.” Bibi gazed at me. “And your chest. Let your chest jut out. You’re a woman, like I would tell my mother. Show off your beauty for the world to see. Why hide behind a veil?”

For the first time since I had left Tobay, I didn’t feel like a dirty whore from Heera Mandi. Bibi put so much emotion and grace into dancing that as I followed him, I felt like a beautiful dancer and was proud of how I could move.

As time went by, I realized Bibi was determined to see me become a celebrated dancer from Tobay, as if we were bringing glory to the village of Tobay by dancing as whores in Heera Mandi. He said he wanted to pass on his dance legacy and teaching a young girl from his ancestral village of Tobay seemed the right thing to do. Bibi insisted dancing was to be taken seriously. It was the one thing in his life that made him proud, the one thing he would have taught his children, if he had had any. Each movement in classical dance meant something and must be demonstrated to perfection.

I practiced my *abhinaya*, the combined movements of head, torso, arms, and legs, before Bibi’s mirror in his bedroom, my heart pounding in rhythm with my feet. It didn’t matter that I was Muslim and dancing a Hindu religious dance, begging permission from Bhuma Devi to pound the earth with my feet. Dancing freed my spirit from the lowly life of a prostitute and carried me to a magical place I’d never experienced before, a moment without time, without sorrow, without pain. As I performed the intricate head and body movements, a warm feeling blossomed in the pit of my stomach and washed over and around me, a feeling I had experienced only once before, when Dhaaga and I had spent those few moments wrapped in each other’s arms under the pomegranate tree. The day my life had changed forever.
Late one afternoon, as I entered the transvestite brothel courtyard for my dance lesson with Bibi, he rose up from the charpai unsteadily and went into his room, saying there was something he wanted me to see. He brought out an old pink ghagra, a long pleated skirt that spread out majestically like a peacock’s feathers when the dancer twirled around the dance floor. I watched as Bibi placed it with the utmost care on his charpai. “Look at the mirror work and the beautiful rubies.” I traced my fingers over the pigeon–blood rubies that still sparkled at the hem. “Is this yours?”

“This work was done by Master Sohna, Master Gold, the tailor of Jalalpur Sharif.” Bibi’s eyes seemed to look right through this world and into another. “I wore the ghagra at a dance performance in Jalalpur Sharif. When my dance was over, I knew I had made a place in the Chaudhry’s heart.” His gnarled fingers caressed the faded pink ghagra. “He brought me from Jalalpur Sharif to Heera Mandi and said from that moment on I was to dance only for him and no one else.”

“Bibi, you said the tailor burnt himself and his wife and her lover.” I was glad that he had mentioned Dhaaga’s father Master Sohna again. “And no one ever heard from the son again?”

“I… I don’t know.” Bibi carefully carried the ghagra back to his room and walked slowly back to the courtyard. “I don’t know anything about his son. If the Chaudhry visits me, I’ll ask him. He might know.”

“When the Chaudhry comes to visit you again, can you send Peeru to fetch me? I just want to see what he looks like.” I tried not to sound too eager to meet the Chaudhry. I didn’t want to tell Bibi what I knew about the murder of the tailor. He might tell the Chaudhry, who might have me killed out of sheer anger, and then he might even hunt down poor Dhaaga. There was no telling what these Chaudhrys were capable of doing.
“Bibi,” I said, feeling a sudden urge to try on a ghagra sewn by the tailor, as if somehow it would make me feel closer to Dhaaga, “can I try on that ghagra the next time I visit?

Bibi didn’t answer for a few minutes. Then he motioned for me to come closer. “Go into my room. Here, take the keys to my trunk, and try on the ghagra,” he whispered, his shoulders hunched. “Don’t go around telling the other girls. They’ll all want to try it on, too, and by the time I get it back, it’ll be in tatters.”

I stepped into Bibi’s small room, the floor of which was partially covered with a worn maroon carpet. His bed, draped with a faded purple satin bedspread printed with yellow flowers, was placed in the center of the room. The walnut dresser—two bricks placed under the left foot, part of which had broken off—matched the large headboard. Bibi’s steel trunk lay partially hidden behind the green brocade curtains that covered the only window in the room.

I unlocked the trunk and carefully pulled out the pink ghagra that lay on top of a few other brightly colored, sequined ghagras and shalwar kameezes. Taking off my shalwar and kameez, I slipped into the ghagra, which hung loosely from my narrow shoulders. I stood in front of the mirror and ran my fingers over the gold-threaded seams and the perfectly sewn sequins and imagined Dhaaga’s father sitting by the sewing machine with a needle and gold thread, carefully putting each sequin in its place. Smiling at my reflection in the mirror, I imagined Dhaaga entering the room, dressed in a starched white shalwar kameez with a shiny white and gold turban on his head, awestruck at my beauty.

“Mina, my bride, I’ve come for you.” His fingers trace the gold-threaded seam that extends all the way down to the small of my back. “My father made this ghagra just for you. I only wish my mother and my father were here to see how beautiful you look in it.”
“This ghagra’s your father’s gift to me?” I say, placing my hand on Dhaaga’s long, slim fingers. “Every mirror, every sequin is perfect.”

“Perfect like you, my bride,” Dhaaga’s lips linger on the nape of my neck.

“We can take it in a little from the sides, and it will fit you perfectly.” Bibi entered the room, sending my vision of Dhaaga away.

“Bibi,” I said, turning around to face him and pressing my head gently against his chest, “I’ll do anything you ask, but you must let me have this ghagra. At least let me dance in it one time.”

He lifted my face. His sunken eyes held mine before he turned around and quietly left the room. I changed into my shalwar kameez, folded the ghagra, and carefully placed it in the trunk. I let my fingers linger over it before closing the lid. Maybe the next time I wore it, I would really be Dhaaga’s bride, and I would rest my head against his chest, not Bibi’s.

I entered the courtyard and squatted by Bibi’s feet beside the charpai, staring lovingly at his deeply creased face, ready to absorb all that I would be taught that day. A warm feeling washed over me, and I felt closer to Dhaaga, to his family, as if now that I had worn the ghagra, I had touched a part of them.

Bunty, Bubbly, and I prepared feverishly for the upcoming dance performance at which a rich sheikh from Dubai would be the chief guest. Jhanda excitedly informed us that three rich businessmen from Lahore and the rich sheikh would watch our dancing and hear Bubbly’s singing. He even invited Aunty Minnie to sing a classical ghazal. She was more than happy to oblige. We hoped money would be showered upon us, and we would be taken to Dubai as dancing girls.
Any chance I got, I covered myself in the folds of my black burqa and headed toward the transvestite brothel to practice my dancing, which also gave me a chance to spend time with Bibi. He now practiced with me in the confines of his room so as not to anger the young transvestites, all of whom now begged him for the dancing lessons that he felt too tired to give.

“They had cast me aside until you came along,” he said one evening. “Now, if I start practicing with them, too, I’ll die of broken bones. I’ll only practice with you until the dance performance, Mina, my daughter from Tobay.”

I practiced in Bibi’s airless room with the faded green brocade curtains drawn across the window that opened directly into the enclosed courtyard. On the night before the performance, Bibi said he had a surprise for me. Something he had been keeping a secret all these weeks. He opened his steel trunk with his ghagras from his dancing days and gently pulled out the ghagra that Dhaaga’s father had sewn for him all those years ago. I cupped my mouth, letting out a small gasp. Would he let me wear it? No, it was too precious. He probably just wanted to show it to me again.

“I took the sides in for you. Now wear it, and tie these leather cuff anklets on tightly. Let me see you perform the Bharatanatyam for me one last time.” Bibi handed the ghagra to me, a smile playing around his lips. “There will also be a surprise guest waiting to see your performance tomorrow night, a guest who might take you away from Heera Mandi forever.”

I had no clue who he was talking about. Bibi must have arranged for a rich businessman to come specially to see my performance. I carefully slid the pink ghagra over my body, admiring the beautiful sequin and mirror work done by the same hands that had held Dhaaga on the day he was born. Bibi’s makeup lay on the walnut dresser. I applied rouge on my cheeks and pink lipstick on my lips, then lined my eyes with kajol. I smiled at my reflection in the mirror,
eyes glinting with excitement. My soft black curls framed my face, falling slightly over my forehead. I brushed them away teasingly, as if I were flirting with Dhaaga. My slender nose twitched as I powdered it with Bibi’s pressed powder. I was Dhaaga’s bride, and tonight was our wedding night.

Bibi’s eyes lit up when I turned around to face him as he entered the room. He gazed at me lovingly, as a mother might gaze at her daughter in her wedding dress.

“How surprised the Chaudhry will be when he sees you dancing in this ghagra,” Bibi said, taking my face in his hands and kissing my rouged cheek. “I’m old, but he still wants to see me dance. And this ghagra, he says this is his favorite, because it reminds him of the first night I danced only for him. He lives in the past, I tell him,” Bibi said, shaking his head. “He should get a younger dancer, but he says no one dances like me.” He stroked his chin with the tip of his thumb and his index finger. “He doesn’t know I have a daughter now, my Mina, who’ll dance for him, the way I used to. You, my child, are my gift to him.” He sat on his creaky wooden bed and reached his frail hand out to hold mine. “Soon you will have the Chaudhry from Jalalpur Sharif as your only client.”

Bibi’s words felt like glass shattering and falling to the ground in splinters. I wanted to tear that ghagra off my body and run out of the ladyboy brothel. How could I perform in front of the murderous Chaudhry who had destroyed Dhaaga’s family? I could never deceive Dhaaga in this way. And yet, I couldn’t deceive Bibi after all he had done for me, not after he had called me his daughter. I just stared at Bibi, dumbfounded, not knowing how to react.

Bibi gestured for me to stand up and perform for him one more time. He turned on a tape recorder that played classical music and told me to dance in his room for the last time. I tried to strike my feet to the ground, but hard as I tried, I couldn’t manage to even lift my foot.
“Bibi, I’m too tired,” I said, hoping he’d let me go. This was all happening too fast.

“Then just go. I’m exhausted myself.” Bibi lay down for the night, pulling the purple satin bedspread over his body. “Peeru has informed Jhanda that the Chaudhry will be at the dance performance tomorrow. Jhanda said he would be honored to have the Senator Chaudhry as his guest. All these pimps treat us like dirt, but when I walk in with the Chaudhry, I’ll be one of Jhanda’s valuable guests,” Bibi said, slowly starting his descent into sleep. “Now, don’t let me down, Mina. Make this your best performance, and take care of that ghagra. It brought me luck, and tomorrow night, it’ll bring you luck and happiness, my child. Much, much happiness.”
The next night, a torrential downpour lifted the oppressive heat, but swarms of mosquitoes filtered into the large hall that Jhanda had rented in Heera Mandi. Jhanda welcomed the Arab sheikh from Dubai, who arrived with two middle-aged businessmen in a big Land Cruiser. The sheikh was dressed in a traditional long white thoub and gutrah, a robe paired with a white head covering that was kept in place by a black band tied around his head. He was a thin man with sallow skin and a hooked nose that had a massive wart on its crooked tip. I had never seen an Arab sheikh before, and I imagined he had a harem of dark-haired girls with almond-shaped black eyes who took turns at wobbling his wart and keeping it entertained.

A few boys dressed in starched white shalwar kameezes also stepped out of expensive looking cars. I gathered that they were related to the businessmen and were allowed to attend the dance performance. It was late, and the police had cleared the ordinary riff raff out of the area. Only high-end politicians and businessmen were allowed in Heera Mandi now.

I felt relieved that there was no sign as yet of the Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif.

Dressed in the pink ghagra, I peered at our clients from behind a curtain. If the Chaudhry appeared as I danced in this ghagra, would he be reminded, if only for a fleeting moment, of the man who had sewn each mirror, each sequin to perfection with his own hands? Did he ever think of the man his son had murdered?

Worn rugs covered with satin sheets and large hand-embroidered mirrored cushions and fat, round bolsters lay on the floor with colorful ceramic hookahs placed nearby. The dholak, tabla, and harmonium players sat cross-legged, tuning their instruments on a raised platform decorated with flowers in tall crystal vases. They wore their henna-dyed orange-maroon hair
down to their shoulders and were dressed in long, red and green silk kameezes and tight, white drawstring pajamas.

The evening began with a *Kattakh* dance performance by Bunty and Bubbly. Both twirled across the room dressed in long, body-fitting *ghagra* skirts, revealing their waxed legs covered with black, lace stockings and thick, six-layered ankle bells. Bubbly’s ample breasts bounced up and down as she swayed her hips from side to side, much to the delight of the spectators. Their eyeballs widened as if doing so would enable them to take in more of her bountiful assets. Skinny Bunty shook her flat chest, too, but no one really seemed to notice.

Aunty Minnie leaned back against the mirrored bolster with her feet curled under her. She watched intently from under her dark, curled eyelashes and clapped frantically as the girls struck their feet on the floor, their ankle bells clinking in a rhythmic pattern. Bubbly and Bunty stole shy, coquettish glances at the men seated on the floor cushions. The men, in turn, showered the girls with hundred rupee notes. Aunty Minnie hurriedly gathered up the money that landed on the floor like confetti.

As Bubbly and Bunty’s dance came to a close, one of the businessmen, dressed in a white starched shalwar kameez, his protruding stomach plopped sideways on the mirrored floor cushion, motioned for Bubbly to sit next to him. She looked at Aunty Minnie, who smiled her roguish smile. Bubbly was chosen, maybe even shared for the night, and the pockets of Jhanda and Aunty Minnie would be filled.

Next was my performance with Bunty. But, before she had a chance to walk back on the dance floor, I motioned to Jhanda, asking him permission to dance a solitary dance before my *Kattakh* dance with Bunty.
“I’ve been practicing the Bharatanatyam.” I locked eyes with Jhanda, who smiled broadly, his thick moustache wiggling his ears.

“We have all night to entertain our respected guests.” He faced the Arab sheikh, who sat stroking the massive wart on the tip of his hooked nose. Jhanda smiled at the sheikh and then at me. “Dance all you want until one of them decides to spend the night with you,” he whispered in my ear. “Maybe the sheikh will decide for you to perform in Dubai. Make him happy. He’s our trump card.”

I glanced over at the sheikh, now engrossed in a conversation with Aunty Minnie. She gestured for Bubbly to come over and meet him, instead of sitting with the businessman. One of the young boys showed a bundle of notes to Bubbly as she walked past him, but Aunty Minnie shot him a mean glare, prompting him to put his money away. She was focused on the sheikh, and the boy was just a nuisance that night, although his advances would have been more than welcomed at any other time.

I bent forward and touched the floor, then my eyes, and asked Bhuma Devi’s permission to punish the earth with my feet. The raga began. Aunty Minnie and Bubbly sat by the sheikh’s side, glaring at me when Jhanda announced my solitary dance performance. But, just as soon as the dholak and harmonium players started to play, there was a loud clatter of knuckles on the door. One of the boys serving tea to the spectators ran to open it. Peeru, dressed in a blazing orange organza shalwar kameez, entered with Bibi, in a blue chiffon sari with a yellow border, following closely behind.

I spied a dark wooden stick with a shaky hand clutching it, a hand adorned with shiny gold rings on every finger. The murderous handed Chaudhry, I thought, remembering the same gnarled gold-ring ed hand that had opened the door to the Land Cruiser for Bibi that day near
Data Darbar. A slightly bent old man emerged from behind Bibi. Jhanda walked toward him, with a smile as wide as the River Jhelum. Jhanda and the Chaudhry hugged and kissed each other three times on their cheeks. Jhanda gave a slight nod to Bibi but didn’t greet him in the same way.

The old man had a wheatish complexion, pointy nose, and tiny slits for nostrils that flared with each breath he took. His thick lips were stained red with betel juice, and his dark eyes were screened by the menacing puffs of smoke that emerged from the hookah that his Kalashnikov-armed bodyguard carried for him, bringing the mouthpiece to his boss’ lips whenever he signaled for it. I began to tremble right when I saw him.

“Senator Chaudhry Asim Baig from Jalalpur Sharif, now running his son in election to become the next Chief Minister of the Punjab,” Jhanda announced as the Chaudhry grinned, baring his broken, yellow teeth.

My heart thrashed wildly against my chest, but I wanted to make Bibi proud of me, so I forced myself to focus on my dancing. Somehow I blinded my eyes to the sight of the Chaudhry, who was now seated on the center cushion. As a professional Heera Mandi girl, I was used to blocking out the nauseating sight of ugly, oily men staring at me while I set out to become the faceless main character in their dark fantasies. I assured myself that this dance was only for Bibi, and I wouldn’t let him down.

The slow, rhythmic beat of the dholak reverberated in my ears. Some strange force propelled me as I slowly raised my leg. My torso curved the opposite way, and my head tilted at an angle. My eyes remained wide open as I coordinated their movements with those of my neck, face, hands, legs, and feet. My palms faced up then down, and my body moved forward then backward and from side to side, emulating a dancing flame. I imagined I was a devadasi dancing
in a sacred Hindu temple for Lord Shiva. The pulse of the tabla thumped within my bones, and my feet moved as though they were no longer mine. I was a *rajanarthaki* dancing in the court of King Sikander.

The Chaudhry and Bibi leaned against the mirrored floor cushions placed behind them for added comfort and talked in low tones. I turned to see Jhanda take a seat beside them. Aunty Minnie nudged Bubbly closer to the sheikh who sat across from the Chaudhry. Jhanda walked over to where I was standing on the dance floor. He smiled at my spectators, wondering, I was sure, whether the sheikh would choose Bubbly or me as his dancing girl. Jhanda hesitated for a moment, his face pensive before breaking into a gaping smile as he announced to the crowd that this was indeed a special night. The Chaudhry was ready to make me his youngest bride.

Everyone’s eyes focused on me, before someone congratulated the Chaudhry. Jhanda motioned to one of the boys standing by his side to distribute sweetmeats, celebrating the deal. After all, this was no ordinary client. This was the honorable Chaudhry, the senator from Jalalpur Sharif.

I stood awkwardly on the dance floor, hands clasped together. Jhanda came up to me and led me toward the Chaudhry, and my ankle bells jingled with each small step I took toward him. The Chaudhry’s jackal eyes peered at me through a haze of hookah smoke. Bibi nodded his head at me, smiling, as if I had won a contest. All four of us walked toward the entrance.

“Thirty thousand rupees. Done. Take her away from Heera Mandi. Mina is yours.” Jhanda stuffed a wad of notes into his pocket as Bibi and I looked on. The Chaudhry’s bodyguard stood beside him, Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder.

Clutching Bibi’s frail arm, I wished he would tell me that this was all a big mistake, and since he thought of me as his daughter, he didn’t have the heart to send me away.
“The Chaudhry has taken care of me my whole life.” Bibi put his hand on my cheek.

“And you have become like a daughter to me. Now I pass you to him. You can travel with him and pose as his youngest wife, and you can even go back to visit your family in Tobay.” Bibi took me aside, the Chaudhry’s armed bodyguard following close behind. “The government’s Islamic Sharia laws will convict you, Mina, as a felon, if anyone reports you as the Chaudhry’s mistress. So you must always say that you are his wife. Rich men take in mistresses from Heera Mandi all the time and pretend they are their wives.” Bibi glared at the bodyguard. “You can live in the old mansion in Jalalpur Sharif or here in Lahore. I could not pose as his wife, for that is not the destiny of a transvestite, but you will have respect. In the eyes of the world, you’re his youngest wife, so he will shower you with everything you could want. Go, my child. This is your way out of Heera Mandi.”

How could this have happened to me? I felt as if I was in a dream, and my Amma would come to my rescue. Then I realized that my mother had acted no better than Bibi for consenting to marry me off to my cousin Manda. I wondered if she had known about Manda’s reputation when she let Baba promise me to him. Was it just to keep Baba happy? I wondered now whether Bibi knew about the Chaudhry’s past and still wanted me to live with him, entertain him, pleasure him, be the woman Bibi could never have been to him. Is this the fate of helpless women and ladyboys? To send off their daughters or their dancing girls to thugs, just to keep them happy and their own futures secure?

I gazed inside the stuffy hall where Aunty Minnie sat by the Arab sheikh, no doubt discussing plans of sending Bubbly with him to Dubai. I wished Aunty Minnie would shout out at me to make tea for her or to fetch her something. I wished she would coax me into believing
that if I didn’t obey her, Jhanda the pimp would send me back to beg on the streets near Data Darbar.

I walked alongside Bibi to where the Chaudhry and Jhanda stood by the entrance to the hall, trying to buy some time before leaving with the Chaudhry. “I should take my anklets off and change my ghagra, lest I enter looking like a whore from Heera Mandi in front of all the Chaudhry’s servants.”

The Chaudhry heard my request and addressed Bibi. “I want Mina to remain in the ghagra you wore all those years ago. If Master Sohna hadn’t died in a house fire, I would have asked him to sew a new ghagra for Mina. There was no one like him.”

“And his son?” Bibi asked. “Mina was asking about his son…”

The Chaudhry’s gaze swiveled toward me. “Son?”

“We heard in Tobay that he had a son,” I answered quickly. “I… don’t know anything else.” I hoped the Chaudhry hadn’t noticed the quiver in my voice.

The old murderer nodded with dribble hanging down his chin. I felt nervous that he might somehow find out I knew Dhaaga, so I rushed into the hall to say good bye to Aunty Minnie, Bubbly, and Bunty. They looked relieved that I had caught the attention of the old Chaudhry and not the sheikh. They hugged me, saying they couldn’t be happier for me and that I must visit them from time to time in my Land Cruiser. I told them Haris, my Dallar Man might visit soon, and they must tell him I missed listening to his stories of America.

“Of course,” Aunty Minnie said, a quiet expression in her eyes. “I’ll let you know if he visits, and I’ll tell him you’re with a rich Chaudhry now. Bunty and Bubbly might soon be in Dubai, but you can always visit me. You’ll always have a home in Heera Mandi.”
The Chaudhry offered to escort Bibi and Peeru back to their brothel. The armed bodyguard sat in the front with the driver, a broad-shouldered, muscular man around Jhanda’s age. With my pink organza veil wrapped around me, I sat sandwiched in between the Chaudhry and Bibi. Peeru took his seat in the back row. The Chaudhry turned his head toward me, eyes glinting in the dark.

Bibi held my hand the entire way, nodding his head sadly once the Land Cruiser stopped outside the transvestite brothel. Bibi and Peeru stepped out, the latter squealing as his feet landed in a small, muddy puddle left over from the torrential monsoon rainstorm earlier that evening. I thought of the day Peeru and I had danced in the rain, when I had wondered where Dhaaga was at that very moment. I wondered where Dhaaga was now, maybe somewhere near Data Darbar or Heera Mandi, not knowing that I had been sold off to the man who had destroyed his family – unless I could find a way to escape.

Lost in thoughts of running away, I stepped out of the Land Cruiser to embrace Bibi one last time, but my organza veil slipped off my shoulders and fell into the muddy puddle.

“You can’t take this dirty veil with you,” Bibi said, taking the veil from my hands when I retrieved it. “Let Peeru wash it for you, even though you should be on your way. The Chaudhry’s in a hurry.”

“You keep the veil, Bibi,” I said. Some luck the ghagra and the veil had brought me. If I could, I would have taken off the ghagra and given it back to Bibi. What an insult to Dhaaga’s father that I should wear his ghagra to please the Chaudhry.

Bibi clutched the veil in his hand, as wet mud dripped down his blue sari.

“When you travel to Tobay in a big Land Cruiser as the Chaudhry’s youngest wife, your Baba and Amma will wrap you in their arms, Mina, as if you had never left them,” Bibi’s eyes
were glazed with tears. “You must never speak of Heera Mandi again. The Chaudhry’s done you a favor. As long as you obey him, keep him happy and satisfied, he will take care of your needs.”

His muddy grip on my hand tightened. “Remember, in the eyes of the law, you are married to him. Otherwise, the honorable Chaudhry could lose his next election, and you will be back in Heera Mandi. Under Sharia law, you will be imprisoned if the Chaudhry offers proof that you married him and then ran away.”

“How can he prove that I married him?” I blurted out, hoping the old goon couldn’t overhear our conversation.

“The Chaudhry’s a powerful man. Arranging for marriage papers is not a problem for him.” Bibi shook my shoulders the way Amma always did whenever I grumbled about something or the other. “He owns you. Don’t let me down, Mina. I promised him I would find him a worthy dancer, like you.”

I embraced Bibi one last time, wishing I could scream at him for handing me over to his old slum dog of a senator. But, if there was anything I learned in Heera Mandi, it was how to keep my mouth shut and pretend I was grateful to serve dirty old men.

As we prepared to leave the old Walled City, I lowered my head, hoping the Chaudhry would think I had fallen asleep as I tried to stay focused on how to stall my journey to Jalalpur Sharif. I hoped I had the guts to carry out my plan. I could come up with nothing else, so I complained of hunger, muttering something about wanting to eat. I didn’t know if the old man could hear well, so I brought my hand to my mouth. He glared at me for a few moments, then ordered his driver to fetch me samosas from a nearby stall.

The Land Cruiser came to a stop outside a tea stall, and the driver stepped out and walked toward a young boy frying samosas in a deep fryer. From the corner of my eye, I watched the
driver place an order for the samosas, knowing this was my chance to run away. Glancing over at
the sizzling oil in the fryer, I knew that once the driver purchased the samosas, we would be on
our way again, and my chance to be free of the old slumdog would be over. I peered at the
Chaudhry sitting with his stick by his side and told him I needed to urinate. He let out a low
snicker but motioned for me to open my side of the door. Before I had a chance to step out, he
ordered me to open his side of the door and help him step out of the Land Cruiser, because he
needed to relieve himself, too.

“We can pee behind the mound of garbage,” he ordered. “I’m an old man and must pee
all the time. Not once at night, but many times, as you will soon come to know.”

I had no choice but to let him follow me to the garbage heap. Maybe I could push him
into the garbage where he really belonged.

“You know the tailor of Jalalpur Sharif and ask questions about him,” he said as we
approached the piled-up garbage, spilling onto the road. We were alone for the first time, my so-
called husband and I. He was just another pimp, with the title of “senator.” Standing with his legs
apart behind the mound of garbage, he told me to untie his drawstring. I hesitated for a moment,
and then turned my head to the side. I tugged at and untied the knot, wishing a rat would jump
out of the heap and bite off his shriveled old trunk. He hiked up his long shirt and had me hold it
in place with one hand. Lowering his shalwar, he had me hold the drawstring with the other hand
so the shalwar wouldn’t fall down to his ankles as he peed, his stinking urine forming a frothy
puddle in the heap.

Finally, we walked back to the Land Cruiser, passing by the tea stall, hot oil hissing in the
large frying pan, ready to be filled with a fresh batch of samosas. A few men sat engrossed in
idle chatter and sipping tea on sagging charpais. I was about to lose my chance. I leaned over the
fryer, tilted the hot frying pan, and doused oil on the old Chaudhry. Some of the oil spattered on my feet, but I didn’t care. The wretched man screamed like a wild jackal. I don’t know what happened next. I just ran as fast as I could. Dhaaga’s last memory of his mother was when she poured kerosene oil over herself, lit a match, and burned. This—I thought, as the Chaudhry burned in oil, and I skittered away from the tea stall—this, Dhaaga, is for you and your mother.

I dodged a group of boys who called out to me, whistling and passing loud comments my way. The heel of my shoe broke, but I kept running. I had escaped. I was free.

Turning into a dark alley, I headed towards Data Darbar, but the high beam of a large Jeep blinded me as it entered the alley from the opposite way. Rows of drab apartments were on either side of the alley, seemingly glued to each other. I knew I had nowhere to hide. The window of the Land Cruiser opened. A man fired shots from his Kalashnikov, the sounds echoing in the narrow alley. I froze. The only sensation I had was in my feet, stinging from the burning oil. *This was it.* I buried my face in my hands, bangles jingling in the night. This was the last sound I would ever hear… the jingle of my bangles before he pulled the trigger.

*Ya Allah, help me. Dhaaga…*

A man’s footsteps hurried towards me. I cracked my eyelids. The muzzle end of his Kalashnikov pointed straight at my chest. His hand grabbed my elbow. Something hit my face. I didn’t see the punch coming. I tried to draw a breath, but it felt as if the Land Cruiser itself had hit me at full speed. I tried to breathe again, but only a low, choking sound escaped my lips. I felt hair being ripped from my scalp and howled with pain as he dragged me, pushed me into the Land Cruiser, and slammed the door shut.

I lay curled on all fours, choking, trying to take in small breaths. Then there was total, complete darkness.
Blood-red anklet bracelets hang from pomegranate trees. Their piercing jingle causes the muddy water in the stream to rise and smash against my body, which is entwined in the branches of the pomegranate tree. Bloody bracelets bite me, chew at my flesh. Parts of my body are flung, discarded like bits of red-splattered trash, into the stream that runs by Tobay. The anklets are chattering. They form red bloody hands that grab my throat, choke me, so I can’t breathe. They connect together, a million bloodied teeth becoming a being, a creature gnawing on me, dragging me into the water. I see him now. It’s the king-jinn, and he’s claimed me as his queen of the underworld.

“Mina-jinn, Mina-jinn.” I hear his loud thunderous voice as we descend into the opened skull of a severed head bobbing amidst the crashing waves of the clogged stream.

My eyes cracked open. Drenched in sweat, I lay in a dark, damp barrack at Lahore Central Jail, huddled next to women prisoners sprawled on straw mats, their shriveled bodies covered in white veils, like corpses awaiting their burial in mass graves. Hail stones, the size of marbles, smashed against the iron-barred window, growing larger and larger until they seemed to explode in my head. Wrapping my white veil around me, I shut my eyes tight, opened them, shut them, then opened them again, anything to keep awake, to keep the nightmare from returning.

“You are sentenced to prison for indulging in illicit sex, a crime in the eyes of the Sharia law,” said the judge, as I stood facing him, my head bent, staring at the lesions on my feet from the hot oil I had splattered on myself when I knocked the pan on the Chaudhry. “You will receive thirty
lashes, a punishment down from hundred lashes. You are a young girl, and the law is not above
showing mercy to young girls.”

Three of the Chaudhry’s goons claimed in front of the judge that I had eloped with a boy
from my village, and my parents had asked for the generous Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif’s help
in finding their daughter and honorably returning her home. The thugs said they followed my
alleged lover and me into a hotel room behind Data Darbar and caught us in the Forbidden
Shameless Act.

I resisted them, they proclaimed, when they tried to knock some sense into me, making
me acknowledge my honor and my shame as a Muslim girl. I succumbed to their pressure,
begging for mercy. But, since this was an act punishable by laws put in place by the General
himself in the name of religion, the honorable Chaudhry, the respected senator from Jalalpur
Sharif, believed that only the courts should decide my fate. My alleged lover, a scrawny-looking
boy I had never seen before, stood next to me and admit his guilt. He, too, was sentenced to
prison and awarded thirty lashes to be carried out in public. That was the first and last time I ever
saw him.

The General’s laws, which he called God’s Laws, had sealed my dismal fate. The women
in my barrack said the boy would probably be acquitted due to lack of any physical evidence that
he had engaged in any sexual activity. They also said I should consider myself lucky the thugs
hadn’t accused me of adultery, for then the law would have sentenced me to death by stoning.

“They could have produced false marriage papers with your thumb print on them. How
did you get into all this trouble?” someone asked. “Where are you from?”

Heera Mandi, I said internally. But, would the women have believed me when I said that
not even a dirty whore like me deserved to be punished this way? The Chaudhry’s goons had
ripped off the pink ghagra, the one I had dreamed of wearing as Dhaaga’s bride, and locked me up in a room without water or food. I had cried out for mercy, but they spat on my face, saying a whore from Heera Mandi deserved no better. They took turns raping me, said they were upholding the honor of the Chaudhry. Anyone who harmed him deserved a punishment even harsher than this. “Once we’re done with you, we’ll hand you to the police. Let them have their fun with you.”

I glanced at the women gathered around me in the prison courtyard. Most were manually stone grinding whole red peppers, cumin seeds, turmeric, and whole cardamom seeds for the jail superintendent to take to her house within the prison compound. “I’m from Tobay,” I answered. “I was tricked by my stepmother into leaving. She’s the one who should have been punished and put in jail.”

“And the court said you ran away on your own?” inquired Tasneem, a middle-aged woman around my Amma’s age, her eyes watering from grinding the hot red peppers.

“If only someone would ask my Baba or my Amma if I would have ever run away on my own,” I said, grinding together white cumin seeds with coriander seeds and turmeric.

The women gazed at each other and nodded. I later learned that most of them were innocent victims like me.

Tasneem’s husband had accused her of an extramarital affair and had planned to kill her and her assumed lover in the name of “honor.”

“But then he ‘took pity’ on me, he said, and instead turned me in to the courts,” Tasneem said calmly, as if she had accepted her husband’s decision. “He accused me of sleeping with his brother. Convenient way to be rid of me.”
Maybe Baba had filed a charge of adultery against Nazo when she ran away from Tobay. Maybe the police had found Nazo and locked her in prison, and now I would meet her. She would jingle her red bangles, a cloud of floral scent trailing after her as she made eyes at the guard, so he would set her free. Or, maybe Nazo was dead. I wondered if Aasif’s family had caught them and butchered them in the name of honor.

Even though I could never forgive Nazo for deceiving me and bringing shame upon my family, I still wondered how things would have turned out had she been allowed to marry Aasif. For one thing, Nazo would never have become Baba’s wife, and I would still be living in Tobay.

As far as I was concerned, the word honor should be ditched in a rat-infested sewage drain and remain covered in shit for all the lives that were destroyed to protect it.

I was in jail for four months before I had a visitor: Bibi. The Chaudhry had shown his favorite dancing girl the burn marks on his hands and feet, cursing me loud and clear.

As if more curses could bother me now. They were like those dead mosquitoes that Dhaaga brushed off his bare chest every morning. He said he had been bitten so many times that his body must have developed a poison against them. Every mosquito that bit him, fell down dead on his chest.

Bibi told me the prison guards laughed as they assessed him, wrapped in a gray sari, waddling into the prison grounds and asking for permission to meet with me. He had stood in line outside the prison gates, waiting to see me during visitors’ hours.

“You,” the prison guard, a short pumpkin-faced woman dressed in the uniform khaki shalwar kameez, called out to me as I sat reading the Holy Qur’an in the barrack that I shared
with sixty other women. “You have a transvestite who says he’s your Aunty. I say Aunty/Uncle, Uncle/Aunty, what difference does it make? That ladyboy’s an it. An it with no tit.”

The guards stood around staring at Bibi, making it easy to spot him seated in the visitors’ area after my “mandatory search.” He had a basket of mangoes in his lap and held his head high, not blinking for a second. When he saw me, Bibi stared at me as if I were someone he had met long ago, dimly registering in his memory.

“You look like a shriveled up old woman, not my Mina,” Bibi said in a low voice, wiping his eyes with the pallu of his sari. “Why couldn’t you just have gone with the Chaudhry instead of landing in jail? The Chaudhry decided to spare your life because he knows how fond I am of you. I told him you must have accidentally spilled the hot oil over him and then had run away in fear. He is a respected politician. He can’t have murder on his hands, so he brought you before the courts, like an honorable man of his stature would do. His guards were ready to kill you and dump your body somewhere.” Bibi’s voice broke into a hoarse whisper. “But, he is kind. He is merciful. Everybody has his faults, but the Chaudhry has always treated me kindly, unlike these prison guards who can’t get enough laughs at my expense. We all have our loyalties, Mina, and mine are with the Chaudhry. You should have trusted me and gone with him that night.”

“He’s a murderer, Bibi.” I said out loud, wishing I didn’t have to condemn the only man who had ever shown any compassion towards Bibi. “Dhaaga told me how your Chaudhry’s son murdered his father, Master Sohna, and dishonored his mother—he raped her, Bibi, in her own courtyard. She poured kerosene oil all over her body after that. The last time Dhaaga saw her, his mother was burning, Bibi, burning…” I buried my head in the folds of my veil and sobbed.

Bibi’s faded eyes widened, and his hands fell to his sides, dangling limply as if bereft of all life.
“I don’t believe this, no.” Bibi lowered his head, rubbing his knotted fingers over his grey-stubbled chin. “You didn’t see anything with your own eyes. Nothing, you saw nothing. You’re like my own daughter, Mina. I wanted you to be the woman I never could be to him. I chose you for him. I had faith in you.” Bibi glanced sideways to where the guards stood, feet apart and hands folded behind them, watching us. “The Chaudhry spares you a life spent pleasing dirty men in Heera Mandi, and you accuse him of murder. Your Dhaaga must have lied and made up stories.”

“I wish for both our sakes that none of this was true,” I said, trying to control the quaver in my voice. “I wish that I could’ve gone with the Chaudhry, just to make you happy, but I couldn’t. For Dhaaga’s sake, I couldn’t. Maybe I deserve to die for the pain I’ve caused you. Maybe I should just die here, and then you’ll forgive me for what I did to the Chaudhry.”

Bibi raised his head. “I can never forgive you for what you did to the Chaudhry. But you have made a place in my heart, filled up that void I’ve carried all my life by becoming my daughter. But, my hands are tied, Mina.” Bibi leaned forward, adjusting his sari. “There is still one person, though, who might help you.”

“Anyone, Bibi, anyone,” I pleaded, tears streaming down my cheeks, my hands clasped tightly.

“A man came by two weeks ago asking about you,” Bibi glanced at the guards. “He said his name was Haris Kareem, and he lives in America. A client of yours from Heera Mandi, I presumed. I told him you were in prison. He said he was Jhanda’s friend, and Jhanda had told him what you had done and how you landed in prison. Haris said his visits to Pakistan were boring now that he couldn’t see you, and he had no one who waited for him now, who made him feel important the way you did.”
“Haris Kareem.” I felt as if my voice, my heart, my soul would explode in a million pieces. He knew. He had heard. “I used to call him Dallar Man.”

“Hush, child.” Bibi put a finger to his lips smudged with light pink lipstick and sat back in his chair, glancing again at the few other visitors and prisoners. “I didn’t think he could help you. But, he spoke so fondly of you. His wife and his older daughter, he said, always complained about how the gifts he brought from America and the money he sent was never enough, and you, you just waited to hear his stories.” Bibi leaned his bent back forward to where I sat across from him with the creaky old wooden table between us. “Once a transvestite from our brothel was beaten by the police, and dragged by his hair at a public protest. This woman lawyer helped free him. I gave this Haris her address and said to contact her and see if she could help.”

“What did Haris say?”

“He took the address and said he’d think about what to do.” Bibi edged closer across the table. “Shush, go now. Not a word of me helping you in anyway to anyone—I don’t want the Chaudhry’s family to think I betrayed them by helping you. I feel guilty already, but I know I must do something.” He held my eyes. “Do people in prison know of your profession?”

“Profession?”

“What you did? Jhanda?”

“What difference does it make whether I say anything or not? I’ve been used the same way in prison, Bibi….” I spoke softly, although I wished I had the courage to speak loud enough for the guards to hear. What else could they do to punish me more?

“Enough. I have said enough already. If the Chaudhry’s son finds out I was here, who knows what he’ll do?” Bibi pushed his chair away, almost tripping over his sari, which had come
loose around his waist. I noticed the two guards who stood by the entrance door grinning like fools at Bibi.

Bibi glared at them and walked away quietly, his back straight and his head held high.

Later that night, after I’d mopped the crumbling cement floor in our barrack, I lay on my tattered wicker mat and thought of my profession. I had not told a soul of what I did before being thrown in jail. Everyone in my barrack claimed to be innocent of any wrongdoing, ever. If they knew who I was, they would point fingers at me, maybe even think that I had gotten what I deserved. I wondered if there were any other girls from Heera Mandi here, pretending to have led chaste, protected lives before being convicted of adultery or fornication.

One of the girls in my barrack was Shabnam, a young girl of thirteen or fourteen from a village near Rawalpindi, who had delivered a son while in prison. Her brother-in-law had repeatedly raped her, while her husband worked in Saudi Arabia. But, because she couldn’t produce the required four male witnesses to prove it hadn’t been consensual, she had been convicted of adultery and now remained in jail with her son. Her brother-in-law had been acquitted because like my alleged lover, the one with the teapot-handle ear, the Federal Sharia Court couldn’t find any evidence on his body that he had ever raped her. I thought of Dhaaga’s mother every time I looked at Shabnam and couldn’t decide whether it was better for a woman to set herself on fire rather than live a life of shame and dishonor.

Shabnam said she couldn’t imagine how she would face her son when he was old enough to understand what had happened to her. She wondered if he would believe his mother to be innocent of any wrongdoing. Or, like other men, would her son accuse her of having enjoyed sex with her brother-in-law? At least her little boy wouldn’t be haunted by memories of his mother
being raped, the way Dhaaga had been. But, like Dhaaga, Shabnam’s son would forever be branded the son of a dishonored woman.

There were women accused of murder, too, and they were kept in small jail cells unlike our barracks. Naila from the village of Musa had set her husband and mother-in-law on fire, dousing them with kerosene oil. Then she burned her children, all four of them, before fleeing to her lover’s house to share the good news that they were free to be together at last. Her lover, in turn, had dragged her along the streets of Musa and turned her in to the police.

“I got my punishment, but I’d do it all over again, if I had to,” Naila said. Her black hawk eyes held a maniacal expression in them that frightened me. I decided to stay away from her. Even the guards seemed afraid of her. They kept her locked in solitary confinement most of the time. Occasionally, they let her out to scare all of us into behaving, threatening us with having to share our barrack with her.

Once Bibi left, hope for my release stirred within me. I didn’t know how the lawyer would help free me from prison, and I wasn’t sure whether Haris really cared enough to even contact her on my behalf. All I knew was that Haris wouldn’t want his wife to ever find out about me, so whatever he did for me would have to be done in secret. Maybe Haris really did care enough to help. Bibi had said he spoke of me very fondly, saying how now that I wasn’t there for him, he didn’t know how to pass his time in Pakistan. I forced myself to believe that that was enough of a reason for him to want to help me. I couldn’t read his mind, but I knew he cared for me. I thought of all the times he had complained about his wife just wanting him for his dollars. If I didn’t matter to him, why would he have contacted Bibi and taken down that lawyer’s number? Maybe just this once, fate was on my side. Haris missed me enough to want to see me out of jail!
But then, what good deed had I ever done in this life to deserve any sort of luck? I had shamed myself with Dhaaga. I hadn’t wanted him to stop, and if I didn’t believed at the time that there was a jinn in the pomegranate tree watching us, Allah only knows what else Dhaaga and I would have done. Allah had punished my entire family for my wrongdoing by bringing Nazo into our lives. There must have been something evil inside of me, too, because I always looked forward to spending time with Nazo. If I had been good like Amma, I would have stayed away from Nazo. I thought of the nights I had waited for Baba and Amma to be asleep in their room, so that I could sneak into Nazo’s room. How could I judge Nazo now? She had run away with a boy, but hadn’t I snuck away with Dhaaga, too? Hadn’t I hurt my family like she had, by doing what I did with Dhaaga?

Then I had chosen to work in Heera Mandi, when I could have killed myself instead, the way Dhaaga’s mother had. I deserved to die in prison, because I had made the wrong choices. I had fallen into temptation and had no one but myself to blame for it. I didn’t deserve Dhaaga’s love or Haris’ kindness. I deserved nothing.

I had these thoughts for months after Bibi’s visit, until one day the warden sent for me. I was told that someone very important was waiting for me.
Haris and I sat in the posh living room of Huma Hassan’s whitewashed, two-story bungalow in Upper Scotch Corner, one of Lahore’s upscale neighborhoods, located off the spacious, tree-lined Mall Road. Huma was one of Lahore’s most well known human rights lawyers. She was tall, thin, and flat chested with bony hips that barely moved when she walked. Huma appeared to be around my Amma’s age. Her short, curly, black hair grayed at the temples, and her long, slim hands were threaded with blue veins. She sat on her shiny brown leather sofa, one leg elegantly crossed over another, looking very comfortable in a V-necked green T-shirt and blue jeans, without any veil draped over her narrow shoulders.

I sat with my head lowered, feeling uncomfortable on the shiny brown leather sofa placed next to hers, with Haris constantly tapping his fingers on the walnut armrest. I still couldn’t believe that I had been freed from prison, or that Haris had cared enough to contact Huma and secure my release.

I gazed at Haris as he ran his fingers through his shiny black hair, explaining the situation to Huma. “I knew once you found out that Mina was the girl who’d burned that old senator, you’d want to help her,” he said. “I’ve read about the campaign you’d led against that old thug. Pakistani politics is a mess. All these corrupt politicians exploiting these poor people!”

“These girls aren’t even made aware of any rights they have to a lawyer.” Huma-ji’s voice was soft for someone so powerful. The corners of her soft, brown eyes crinkled against the slanting mid-afternoon sunlight that poured through the tiny slits in her bamboo shutters onto the
black and beige marble floors covered with large oriental rugs. Light blue walls were adorned with oil paintings depicting village women draped in large white muslin veils working in corn and wheat fields. A walnut coffee table, placed in the center of the living room, contained two sculptured figures of a turbaned man and a woman in a yellow veil, both wearing light green shalwar kameez, playing the tabla and the harmonium. I had never seen a more beautiful room in my life. “They say the Chaudhry suffered burns all over his body and remained in intensive care for a long time.” Huma-ji sucked on the mouthpiece of the hookah that was placed by her side. I wondered what a fashionable lady like her was doing smoking a hookah the way my Ma-ji used to do. “He might even be dead for all I know, dead at the hands of a slave-girl he had just purchased, the only girl who had guts to do what… what even I wouldn’t have dared to do. When you told me about her, I knew I had to take a stand and rescue her.”

I sat listening, thinking how if only they knew how terrified I had been, how if I had had another second to think, I might not have done it.

“The Chaudhry’s son is running to become the Chief Minister of Punjab and would not want to have any journalist attach his father’s name to that of a dancing girl,” Huma-ji said. “Thankfully, no one knows her identity. Those goons caught her as soon as she tried to escape.”

“If the Chaudhry dies, and his people find out that she’s here, could she then be accused of murder?” Haris asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

“If worst comes to worst, we can seek political asylum for Mina and try and get her out of the country,” said Huma-ji, her gaze fixed on the sculptured figure of the turbaned man playing the tabla. “For that, her identity would have to be revealed, and journalists, maybe even the foreign press, would be interested. Of course, every time a case enters western newspapers, people here feel I’m airing our dirty laundry in public.”
“Your own husband was a Chaudhry, a feudal lord.” Haris avoided Huma-ji’s icy gaze.

“You are brave, Madam, to help these girls, even though you yourself… Bibi said…”

“I don’t need Bibi or you or anyone else to remind me who my husband was or what he did.” She glared at him. “If I ever need you to provide support for Mina, should she leave the country, I’ll let you know. Each girl whom I rescue becomes my family. And you’ll help me, Mr. Haris. You wouldn’t want your family to know about Heera Mandi and your connections to Mina.”

Haris looked like a wrestling bear, suddenly cornered. “Don’t forget if I hadn’t contacted you about Mina, she’d still be locked up in prison.”

Huma stared Haris down as if she was a Chaudhry, and Haris should be grateful to have his life spared, just this once. Then she swiveled her gaze toward me, for what seemed like a long time. I lowered my head, felt my heart explode in my chest.

Haris stood up to take his leave. “My wife and daughters, if they should know… once Mina’s case goes public, people are bound to find out what she did before she was imprisoned. Some people will think she got what she deserved.” Haris looked past us, toward the window with the lemon tree outside it. “I don’t, otherwise I wouldn’t have asked you to help her. But, I don’t want to be in the picture when that happens. I do have a reputation at stake, being the father of two girls, one of whom is of marriageable age and the other…” His face darkened. “I’m sure you understand my situation. That’s why I keep visiting Pakistan, so people don’t think I have abandoned my family. Without a father to support them, my daughter’s marriage proposals might dwindle. My daughter has a dowry made from dollars. That is a ticket to a good marriage proposal.”
“I think you’re wasting my time now.” Huma stood by the entrance to her living room. “Mina will stay with me, and I’ll see to it that she is kept safe. No one knows but my old driver and my cook, both of who’ve been through all of this with me many times before and can be trusted to keep their mouths shut.”

“Of course, Madam,” Haris mumbled, making an attempt to clear his throat before walking out the front door.

I wanted to thank Haris for saving me. He was a kind man, and I hoped he would come back and visit me. I felt secure with him. Baba would never have taken me back if he knew I worked in Heera Mandi, but Haris had gone out of his way to save me. Haris had, after all, met me in Heera Mandi! I used to think if I ever met Dhaaga again, he would refuse to have anything to do with me if he ever found out that I worked as a prostitute, but with Haris it was different. He and I would always carry memories of our time in the red-light district. How could we ever judge each other in any way?

“Some people are coming over today to plan out the public protest against the laws that put you in jail,” Huma-ji announced one morning, walking into her study. “Don’t tell them anything about yourself. Just say you work here, and seat them in the back patio room. I just need some time to myself. Can you bring my breakfast to the study, instead of the dining room?”

She had returned from her regular game of golf, which she played at the Lahore Gymkhana Club. I often wondered why a smart lady like her wasted several hours in the hot sun trying to stick small balls into muddy holes.
“American breakfast,” I said, carrying the breakfast tray with two fried eggs and buttered toast to Huma-ji’s small study. The wobbly egg yolks reminded me of Haris’ American breakfast.

“Haris must’ve taught you that,” she said, brows raised, hands cupping her face. “Don’t think of any more boyfriends, or whatever they were. There’re other things you can do, like maybe learn to read and write.”

“Haris was teaching me English,” I said. “I know some words, but I can’t read or write them.”

“I’m scared to even ask the words he taught you.” Huma stared at the pieces of cut watermelon and mango that I had carefully arranged on her plate. “I’ll bring books for you and get the cook’s daughter to teach you how to read and write. She attends school and is free in the evenings.”

“Haris can teach me too,” I blurted out.

“This is not Heera Mandi. That’s what scares me about girls like you, who get so used to earning money in Heera Mandi that they resort to their old ways no matter how much we help them.” She took a bite of the toast. “When I’m finished with the breakfast, fetch me the hookah.”

“Huma-ji, you smoke a hookah like my grandma used to,” I said, placing the hookah by her side. I was glad to have a chance to talk to her. I still wanted to find out what had happened with her husband and why she lived alone. “Did your husband teach you?”

“My husband wouldn’t have taught me anything.” She swiveled her head in my direction. “Why do you want to know?”
“I think, Huma-ji, you don’t look happy.” I sat at her feet. “You’re always working, never resting. All alone, always worrying about everyone else.” I stopped before I said something to anger her.

“I don’t have to be alone.” Smoke trailed through her mouth and over her shoulder. “I choose to live alone.”

I nodded, not knowing what else to say or do.

“Today’s my daughter’s birthday.” She suddenly spoke up. “Had she lived, today would’ve been her eighteenth birthday. She’d be thinking about college, maybe of becoming a lawyer herself.”

“Your daughter?” I stared at her.

“I had a daughter once.”

“And she died?”

“They wrapped her in a pink blanket. I held her in my arms, and then she closed her eyes, and…”

“Huma-ji, I’m so sorry. You never had more children?”

“Maybe I would’ve, if I’d stayed on.”

“Where?”

“You really want to know? Maybe I should’ve done to my husband what you did to the old Chaudhry.” Her eyes had glazed over. “My daughter was born on this very day, and she died on this very day.” She buried her face in her hands. “Do I celebrate her birth or mourn her death today? You tell me.”

I knelt by her side, daring to hold her soft hands in mine. I hoped she didn’t catch the smell of her hand lotion, which I used on my own hands everyday when she was out of the
house. The lotion smelled faintly of roses, and I often snuck into her room to douse some on my body, along with dabs of her Medora lipstick and talcum powder.

“I saw them, my husband and my sister. I confronted him, and he went crazy.” She stared into space. “Threw me against the wall. The pains started, and the baby, my baby—I left soon after.”

“And he never came after you?”

She let out a snicker. “I was the first wife. My sister was the second, and five more wives, I think, came after her.”

“How did Haris find out?”

“Once I started practicing law and started speaking out against these harsh laws, all the stories about my personal life were leaked out in the press.”

She became silent. I sat wondering how to console her, how to take her painful memories away, to somehow repay her for helping me. But, how could someone like me ever help someone like her?

“Huma-ji, I love a boy, too. His name was Sikander, but I called him Dhaaga,” I said. “I know if I ever see him now, I’ll always be scared he’ll find out about Heera Mandi.”

I told her about Dhaaga and how the Chaudhry killed his parents.

“So that’s why you wanted to run away from the Chaudhry,” she said, turning her head toward me. “I did wonder why, since you were a prostitute, you didn’t want to go with such an important client. If we find Dhaaga, I could use his testimony in court against the Chaudhry.”

“But then he’ll find out I worked in Heera Mandi and he’ll never take me back!” I knew I couldn’t let Huma-ji ever find Dhaaga.
Huma-ji waved a hand in my direction. “Right now I have to focus on the protest. I was thinking I couldn’t take you there to protect your identity, but that might be one way of finding Dhaaga. If he sees you there, he’ll just come to us himself!”

I listened quietly, knowing I couldn’t argue with Huma-ji. I wanted to find Dhaaga more than anything else in the world, but I would have to make sure that if he was at the protest, he wouldn’t meet Huma-ji. Maybe if I saw him, I could just run away at the protest with Dhaaga without Huma-ji finding out. Just get lost in the crowd somehow.

“Someone’s knocking. Get the door, please,” Huma-ji said through the hookah smoke.

I got up to answer the door, wondering how I could look for Dhaaga and run away with him at the protest without Huma-ji or anyone else ever finding out.

Then the question remained: what if Dhaaga wasn’t there? What if he was not even in Lahore?
For the next week, I helped Huma-ji and her friends paint banners for the public protest in two weeks. Meetings were scheduled regularly at her house, concerning new cases of women put behind bars, of honor killings, and the public rally planned to protest the laws that robbed women of their rights and left them without a voice.

The women who came to the meetings wore dark sunglasses and high heels and carried fashionable-looking handbags that swung like mangoes from trees as they breezed by the library room, where the cook’s daughter Azra and I sat studying Urdu and English texts. Sometimes men and women from organizations other than the Human Rights’ Organization also met with Huma-ji. These were lawyers and doctors and housewives, all planning jointly for the public event. Huma-ji introduced me as a client whom she had rescued from prison, but other than that, my identity was not disclosed.

One day, I was struggling with a math problem that Azra had given me to solve.

“Why don’t you make a poster for yourself to carry on the day of the protest?” Huma-ji held a white poster board and a black marker in her hand.

“What do I write on it?” I asked, looking up from my math book, still trying to figure out what four times seven was.

“Something that will attract Dhaaga’s attention, if he’s there.”

“I can just write his name,” I said, excitedly. “How many people are called Dhaaga?”

October 14th, 1987: the date of the public rally. The peepal trees that girded the entire length of Mall Road looked resplendent in their bright fall hues as we stepped out of Huma’s car and
walked toward the old, two-story, redbrick building of the Lahore High Court. Holding my banner high, we squeezed through the crowd gathered on Lower Mall Road. Fearing someone would recognize me from Heera Mandi, I stayed hidden in the folds of my black burqa as we walked toward the wooden platform. After Huma-ji addressed the protestors, we planned to march toward Assembly Hall in a peaceful demonstration. Police and army guards atop horses patrolled the area, ready to set off tear gas if the situation got out of hand. There were buses lined up along the streets that had transported people from far away. Journalists interviewed a few women who stood by the podium. Huma-ji told me to hold the banner up high and stand on the side of the podium.

“If by any chance you see Dhaaga, seek him out and let me know,” she said, as we walked amidst the large crowd that was comprised mainly of women and college girls, lessening any chances of Dhaaga being there. “His testimony can put the Chaudhry behind bars.” She stepped onto the stage and grabbed the microphone.

“We are one voice.” Huma-ji cried out, the microphone gripped tightly in her hand as she drew the crowd with rage in her voice. “We are women. And we are asking for our rights that have been granted by Allah but taken away by the General. We are women. And we have a voice. We are your mothers. We are your sisters. We are wives, and we are daughters, and we demand justice. We want our sisters and our mothers and our daughters freed from jails where they languish day after day. We want his Sharia laws repealed! We want justice! We will not sit quiet!”

The crowd raised their hands, echoing her words: “We are women. We want justice. We will not sit quiet! We will not sit quiet!” They chanted fiercely.
I searched for Dhaaga. If I caught a glimpse of him, I would just run toward him before Huma-ji saw what I was doing. I smelled smoke coming from the street and, just as suddenly, saw policemen running toward the fire as the crowd scattered. The police began hit people with sticks and dragged some of the protestors into police vans. I tried to run away, but my eyes and throat burnt from the tear gas the police had set off. A stick hit me on my head. Blood oozed down my face as my head spun, and I reached out to hold on to the edge of the stage. I tried climbing onto the stage, when a hand suddenly seized my arm.

“Mina!”

His grip on my wrist tightened, and I felt him lift my body. Then there was darkness all around me. When I opened my eyes, I was in a large room that teemed with men and women brought in from the protest, lying in hallways, propped up on wheelchairs or steel beds. The air stank of sweat and cigarette smoke and antiseptic. I opened my eyes and tried to speak, but my throat was painfully dry. I had a large adhesive plaster on the side of my head, and my left arm was in a sling. Then I knew I was dreaming, because suddenly I saw Dhaaga by my side. He leaned over and reached out his hand and brushed back my hair where it curled at the temples. Maybe I had died, or I was dreaming with my eyes open. Dhaaga was here. He was everywhere.

I felt my body relaxing under his hand, settling back into sleep. After a while, I awoke with a pounding headache, and nausea engulfed me. I felt a hand behind my neck, propping me against the wall, and I saw arms, skinny arms with strong, protruding veins. I was dreaming again. Dhaaga was back. My shiny, satiny piece of thread was back in my life.

“Am I dead?” I clutched the ends of the man’s T-shirt in my hand.

“I couldn’t believe that was you...” Dhaaga’s voice! I’d know that voice anywhere. If I was dead or dreaming, I wanted to just remain in that state. “Collapsed on the stage. I was there
with my ambulance, helping bring people in, and there you were! I’m almost scared to ask you how you got to the city or what you were doing at the protest.”

“I’m not dead? I said, half-whispering, still unable to think correctly. “Dhaaga, it’s you? I’m not dreaming? Oh, Dhaaga!”

“I know you’re tired,” he whispered, stroking my hair. “My sweet Mina. Let me just keep looking at you.” His voice was soft, tender.

“I’ve spent all this time wishing I could see you just one more time.” I reached out and touched the scar on Dhaaga’s cheek, first just with my fingertips and then with my whole hand. I rested my hand for a moment and then took it away. “How did you get this scar?”

Dhaaga shook his head and said nothing. He sat by my bed, and I gazed into his eyes, scared that if I closed them even for a moment, he might magically disappear, and then I would never find him.

I rested, drifting in and out of wakefulness. When I opened my eyes, it was sometime deep in the night. There was blackness in the large hospital ward, and all I could hear was the breathing, snoring, and shifting of patients in beds around me. I flapped a fly away with my hand and looked across the foot of my bed to the open window, half-expecting to see Dhaaga leaning against it, waiting for me to wake up. But, he wasn’t there. What if he had left me alone again? My head pounded as I managed to lift one foot off the bed and place it on the floor. Only it wasn’t the cold, hard cement floor. I had stepped on a body lying on the floor by my bed. I gasped and peered downward.

There, in the faint light from the window, I saw Dhaaga, his bony chest gently rising and falling with every sweet breath. There weren’t any extra beds, or even chairs, so he must have fallen asleep on the floor. Up close, I could see the changes I hadn’t noticed before. His hair was
cut short and didn’t fall across his forehead like it used to. The dark scar across his cheek marred the side of his face, bringing hardness to it. But, the way he had looked into my eyes, had searched my face, made me realize that he had missed me as much as I had missed him.

“Thank God your brother was at the hospital with that ambulance from the shelter,” an elderly nurse wearing a starched white shalwar kameez said after walking from the dimly lit hallway toward my bed. “He helped bring in a lot of the injured people.” I handed her my thin blanket to cover Dhaaga with, but she refused. “You need to keep warm, and we don’t have any extra blankets.”

“Yeh-es,” I muttered, my heart performing somersaults in my throat. I knew I had to leave the hospital as soon as possible. What if Huma came looking for me and found Dhaaga here? I was scared for Dhaaga. If Huma made Dhaaga give his testimony against the Chaudhry, wouldn’t that put Dhaaga’s life in jeopardy? But above all, I knew I never wanted Dhaaga to find out about my past.

The next morning, I forced Dhaaga to have me discharged from the hospital, even though the doctors said I should be under observation for another few days. He drove me in the ambulance he drove for the homeless shelter for child camel jockeys where he worked, saying it would be safe for me to stay there until he thought of a way to take me back to Tobay. My Baba and Amma would be so worried, and he would find a way to contact them to let them know that I was safe. He kept asking what I was doing at the rally. All I kept thinking was that if I told him the truth, my life in Heera Mandi would be exposed, and that would be the end of Dhaaga and me. I thought of making up a story, but the moving air through the open car window made my head hurt.
“Were you here with your cousin Manda?” he suddenly asked as the taxi sped down Ferozpur Road. “Did you end up marrying him?”

“I never married Manda,” I replied, touching the back of his hand, tracing with one finger the curving course of a vein from the knuckle to wrist. “And that’s a long story. Can we just go to the shelter?”

After a while, the ambulance pulled up outside two, large, wrought-iron gates. Dhaaga told me to wait by the gates while he brought a wheelchair for me to sit in. “I keep one here in case one of the kids is too weak to walk,” he said, helping me onto the wheelchair.

“I’ve lived here for a year now,” he said, wheeling me into the shelter. “I never thought I would bring you here, too, one day. I don’t know what happened, but thank God you’re safe now. Thank God you never married that thug, Manda, either.”

We headed toward several brick huts with plaster façades and roofs of corrugated iron that were built around a large courtyard. It was sectioned off into two parts: one half a playground containing brightly painted swings and a red and green seesaw, and the other a cricket field with wickets and cricket bats. A deflated soccer ball and a couple of tricycles lay around. A few young children, their hair disheveled, some with shaved scalps, dressed in ragged-looking shalwar kameezes, halted their play and ran over to meet us, asking Dhaaga who I was and why I had a bandage on my head and my arm in a sling. A few women, too, dressed in shalwar kameez and large white muslin veils, hanging laundry out to dry, walked over, curious to know who I was.

The long, narrow scar on Dhaaga’s cheek moved up toward his eyes as he smiled, explaining to them that I was his sister and had been in an accident. “These children don’t know of any other home but this,” he said, as the children followed us, barefoot or in tattered sandals.
“Most are only four- or five-years-old, kidnapped or sold by their parents. They’ve been rescued from Arab countries where they were smuggled in to run in camel races. A few have been rescued and returned to Pakistan, but many still remain there.”

The children ran away once we entered the office of Mrs. Khan, the Director, a heavy-set, middle-aged woman with a square jaw and a sparse moustache. Each wall in her office was armed with shelving containing books of various colors with thick, dusty spines. A folded prayer rug was placed in a far corner, with a black hijab folded carelessly on top of it. There were framed photographs of Mrs. Khan cutting ribbons and shaking hands with bald, fat men, some of whom I could have sworn I had seen in Heera Mandi.

“Who do we have here?” She studied me for a moment.

“She’s my sister.” Dhaaga hesitated with the words before voicing them. “She was injured in an accident on her way to Lahore from Tobay.” I was glad he didn’t mention the protest.

“You never said you had a sister,” said Mrs. Khan with her hard, flat eyes staring at me like polished stones. “We can’t have family staying here. This is a children’s shelter, not a hotel.”

“She was supposed to work as a maid at this family’s house,” Dhaaga answered. I felt safe. He was already looking out for me. “As soon as she’s better, I’ll take her there.”

Dhaaga’s lie worked well for me. Maybe I could tell him that that’s what I was doing in Lahore, working as a cleaning girl. All I would have to think of now was to make up a story of how I got to Lahore and why I was cleaning houses. My life with him would be one of lies, but I didn’t care. I just wanted him.
Mrs. Khan motioned with her hand. “She can stay in Unit 4. The housemother there is sick with the flu. She can sleep there, but then she must leave once she’s well again.”

Dhaaga turned the wheelchair around, and we left the office. The string of nerves that had tightened in my body suddenly released as I realized that I had entered Dhaaga’s world. I put my hand to the ridged-up skin on the side of my head, felt the crusty blood atop it, and wished my wound would not heal so I would not have to leave the shelter. There was no way Dhaaga would ever find out about Heera Mandi, and I could now live with him just as I had dreamed of, never knowing it would come true. I felt as though I had finally come home. Huma would never think of searching for me in a shelter for camel boy jockeys.

“So now you’re my sister,” Dhaaga said, teasingly as we headed towards Hut No. 4.
“And what happens once we want to get married?”

“Should have thought about that one before lying,” I answered, turning my head slowly toward him.

Dhaaga and I crossed the playground and opened the door to Hut No. 4. Closing the old, wooden door softly behind us, we peered at the middle-aged, gaunt-looking housemother who lay snoring on a wicker mat in the small room, with a few pillows and blankets as thin as bed sheets piled in a corner.

Dhaaga spread out a blanket for me on the mat in the adjoining room and helped me lie down, propping a pillow under my head. “I’ll go over to the other hut and see if I can get some food for you,” he whispered, his eyes lingering on my face as he turned to go. “Try to get some rest before the children break for lunch.” He stood awkwardly, his hands clasped together.

“What’s the address of the place where you worked? What about your Baba and Amma? Where can I find them? Are they here, too?”
“They’re in Tobay,” I said, swallowing hard. “They know I’m here—Dhaaga, you just have to trust me when I say that it’s OK for me to stay here.”

His eyes studied my face. Then he slowly turned and walked to the door, his hand lingering on the doorknob. He turned around and walked right back. Kneeling down, Dhaaga put one hand to my neck and one to my waist and pulled me to him. He held me close before pulling back to look at my face.

“Mina, my Mina,” he said, a thousand questions in his face. “I’ll keep you safe. Give my life up for you, if that’s what it takes.” He touched my brow, smoothed back my hair, and ran his fingertips across my eyelids, cheekbones, nose, and lips. “I thought I would see you only in my dreams. I still can’t believe we’re here together.”

I ran a hand to his shoulder and gripped him tight and held him there. Surely, Dhaaga and I weren’t the same people we had been in Tobay, pretending to be Sikander the Great and his Persian princess riding in a golden chariot, conquering the world. I wondered if my time spent in Heera Mandi had marred my face, and I would look like a whore now no matter how much I tried to mask it.
“I think I’m ready to tell you what happened and how I came to Lahore,” I said to Dhaaga on the third day of my stay at the shelter. Dhaaga had just entered my room carrying a plate of warm flatbread and potato curry. He set it down on the floor mattress and propped my pillow up so I could eat.

The previous night I had a dream in which I found myself in Aunty Minnie’s apartment in Heera Mandi, the walls of my room pressing in as I screamed out for Dhaaga to help me. He stood by the door, wagging a finger at me, telling me I should have burned myself like his mother had done, rather than live a life of shame. “Once the walls cave in,” he said, “you will die, but your soul will be saved because you will no longer be a wretched whore from Heera Mandi. You must die to protect your honor, the way my mother did.”

I awoke drenched in sweat, choking back a warm scream in my mouth. The smell of fear, of desolation swarmed all around me. For a moment I didn’t know where I was. Outside, the night had risen to full dark, and the stars had fled as if to shed light on some other world. I balled myself up on the thin mattress, wishing the suffocation of sleep would overtake me. After a while, I lapsed in and out of muddled wakefulness, forming, at each waking moment, the beginnings of the lies I would tell Dhaaga to avoid any mention of my time in Heera Mandi. I wanted to tell him that I burned the old Chaudhry with hot, sizzling oil, and he must have suffered the same pain that his mother went through when she set herself on fire, but I knew I couldn’t say anything.

As Dhaaga tore off a piece of the thick flatbread and dipped it in potato curry, bringing the morsel to my mouth, I pushed his hand away and edged forward to begin a story reeking of
lies. I told him to be patient and listen. *Listen while I make up a story.* I told him that after our time together under the pomegranate tree, I couldn’t bring myself to marry my cousin Manda or anyone else for that matter. Instead I fled the village, hiding in the backseat of my Uncle Haris’ car when he came to visit us in Tobay. I stayed with him in his house in Lahore. But, sadly for me, Uncle Haris’ wife was very mean, and once my uncle left to go to America, she forced me to work as a maid in her friend’s house.

Dhaaga sat on the edge of the wicker mat, arms folded, eyes focused on me. The housemother was outside hanging laundry, and the children were in the small school built within the compound.

“I never heard of an Uncle Haris before.” Dhaaga handed me a glass of water. “What does your Uncle Haris do in America? I still can’t believe you just ran away. You were terrified just leaving your house. How did you run away with him? And he agreed to it?"

I looked out the window thinking it would break his heart if he found out how Nazo and Aasif had tricked me into leaving. Then I would have to tell him about Data Darbar, begging, and soon enough Heera Mandi would enter into the story. It was better, I decided, to leave everything out and just focus on having an uncle in Lahore. I hated lying to Dhaaga. But, I had no choice if I wanted us to stay together. He was my world. I thought, this wasn’t his Mina speaking; this was the whore who had worked in Heera Mandi and was left with no morals. Dhaaga’s Mina would never lie.

“My uncle was leaving in his car, and I just hid in the back seat,” I said, wishing Dhaaga would just kiss me and not be bothered with the story. “And what does my uncle do in America? He drives a taxi.” At least that was the truth. Haris drove a taxi in America. I knew that.

“Do you want to let your Uncle Haris know you’re here, once he returns from America?”
I shook my head so hard that my veil slipped down to my shoulders. “His wife is a witch—uses up all his dallas and cares for nothing else. Besides, I just want to be with you.”

“We should ask Mullah Omar at the mosque to marry us. I only wish I hadn’t lied to Mrs. Khan, but I didn’t know what else to say at the time. I wish our lives were simple again. I think about Tobay all the time, you and me riding Bindi, hoping your Baba and Amma wouldn’t catch us. Thank God, though, that you never married that Manda. God kept you safe for me.”

I listened quietly, thinking he didn’t know whom he was marrying. He thought he was marrying the girl from Tobay who was content to ride her buffalo to the stream just to be with him. How would he react if he knew the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life was a dirty whore? How could I have worked there? I wish I had forgotten about him and had never seen him again. That would have left him in peace. He would have eventually married a woman worthy of him, and I would have lived out my days in Heera Mandi. At this point, I wished things were the way they were when I used to wait for Haris to come from America and tell me his stories. If Haris were here, he would have told me what to do. I was tired of lying to Dhaaga. I knew I couldn’t make up any more stories, so I asked him to tell me how he had gotten that scar on his cheek.

“I stayed in Data Darbar for a few days after I reached Lahore,” Dhaaga said. “I refused to beg on the streets. I did odd jobs, worked as a shoe-shine boy, cleaned cars parked around Data Darbar, worked in tea stalls serving tea and samosas, anything to keep me going, anything to keep me from begging again on the streets like I did in Tobay.”

He related his story, and I listened, hoping he had done something bad during this time so that I wouldn’t feel so guilty, and then he might understand why I worked for Jhanda. Dhaaga said while working at the tea stall, frying samosas all day long, he met a man who became a
regular customer. He said he took in orphaned beggar children who roamed the area around Data Darbar and handed them to an organization that was funded by humanitarian groups, providing shelters for the children. The organization had paid him well, and if Dhaaga agreed to help take children off the streets, the man said he would make sure Dhaaga was paid for his services. So, he quit his job that same day and followed the man, thinking he was helping the street children the way Amma had helped him, and besides, the money sounded good. But, Dhaaga had been conned. That creep was kidnapping beggar children off the streets, or buying them off from parents too poor to provide for their children. He was then trafficking them to the Gulf region to work as camel boy jockeys.

“How were they rescued?” I had never heard of camel boy jockeys until I had come to the shelter.

“Once I found out what that goon was doing, I threatened to expose him. He laughed in my face, saying he knew the area police, that they had their share in this whole operation. He said my body would be found in a ditch somewhere if I refused to work for him. To make a long story short, that was the day I got this scar across my cheek. He just slashed my face, the bastard. You don’t know these slum dog pimps, Mina.”

Dhaaga had been helping young street children while I had been in Heera Mandi. At this point I missed talking to Haris, who knew all my dirty secrets and didn’t care because he had been a part of them. I could be honest with Haris in a way I could never be with Dhaaga. But, I loved Dhaaga, not Haris.

Dhaaga took a sip of my water. “I heard about a reporter who went undercover trying to dig out the slumdog pimps involved in all of this, and I offered to work with him. He helped me escape and also found work for me at the shelter once it opened. Every time I see these children,
I shudder to think how I could’ve been a victim, too, if your mother hadn’t rescued me off the streets of Tobay.” Dhaaga’s voice wobbled. “Some of these children don’t even remember their own names. They were that young when taken from their homes.”

I could see how Dhaaga would have wanted to help these children, nameless like he was, tagged as a piece of thread all his life. The shelter was Dhaaga’s entire world now, and I wanted it to be mine. Dhaaga said once I was well, maybe I could go back and work for that family again, but I told him they had mistreated me, and I could never go back. I was ready to marry Dhaaga, but he said we would have to find a servants’ quarter at the back of somebody’s house if we were to live as husband and wife. He still didn’t know what Mrs. Khan, whose face was decorated with constant fury, would do once she found out that he had lied to her about me being his sister.

The days I spent at the shelter were the happiest I had ever been. Even though I had nightmares of my time spent in prison, and before that, locked up and raped by the Chaudhry’s goons, just finding Dhaaga again, seeing him every single day as he brought me food on a tray and changed the dressing on my head, helped ease the pain in my heart. I whispered his name a hundred times, a thousand times each day. I wanted to erase all my past memories starting from the time I reached Lahore with Nazo, and just remember the days in Tobay. If I remained in the shelter, I didn’t see how Dhaaga would ever find out about my past.

Dhaaga said I should try to stay out of view of Mrs. Khan as much as I could, lest she should ask me to leave the shelter. So I remained in the hut, helping the housemother with the daily chores and playing with the children. There were six in our unit, four girls and two boys, all around six or seven years old. They treated me as their older sister, asking me to tell them stories at bedtime and sometimes crawling into my lap, cuddling up with me, trying to forget their
ordeal in the desert. Some cried out for their mothers, and I held them tight, wishing, like they did, that I was in my mother’s arms. I knew they would never return to their homes, because they didn’t know where they had lived before being sold off or kidnapped. Plans were to shift the boys to another shelter once they were twelve years or older. The girls would remain here, attend the small school, and learn crafts such as knitting and stitching or weaving baskets that would enable them to earn a living in the future.

A week after Dhaaga and I had recounted our stories, I was roused from sleep by a bony hand gently tapping my cheek and the feel of a warm, wet kiss on my lips. It was Dhaaga; he had crept into my room late at night. In muffled whispers he told me to wear my burqa and leave quietly with him. “I don’t want anyone seeing us leave. People are already wondering whether you’re my sister or not. I’m only allowed to use the van for taking sick children to the hospital, but the guard at the entrance owes me a favor and said he’d keep quiet this one time.”

Dhaaga backed the van out of the driveway, nodded at the guard, and drove into the city. “This night’s for you and me,” he said, as we left the premises, riding under a sky riddled with stars that had multiplied into tangled thickets of light. “Once I find a servants’ quarter, we can get married and won’t have to sneak around anymore. I don’t make enough money to be able to rent a place, but we can live for free at the quarter. If I have to, I can even quit my job here, work full time for the family who lets us stay, and you can help in the house.” He rolled the window down, and I felt a soft whoosh of air flow past my face, making my head giddy with happiness.

“I’m glad you’re thinking for the both of us so I don’t have to,” I grinned, as he took my hand in his and gently kissed my fingers, letting the tips linger in his mouth, teasing them with his tongue.
“There’s this late-night place called Go-Go’s where they serve the best fruit chaat and mango shakes,” Dhaaga said, his hand now resting on my lap, the other placed on the steering wheel.

As we drove onto Mall Road, dark images of the horrific protest, the burning tires, the screams of people being tear-gassed and dragged away by police, stewed within me.

“Thank God you saved me that day,” I said, as we drove through the wide, tree-lined road, streetlights lighting the way. Even at this late hour, cars and motorcycles choked the streets, horns bellowed. “I can’t believe how quiet Tobay was after sunset. The only sound was the muezzin’s call to the night prayer.”

“We were meant to meet again, my Mina.” Dhaaga laughed, his right hand caressing my thigh. “If you hadn’t been at the protest, and the police hadn’t beaten up all those people, I would never have driven there in my ambulance. See that?” He pointed skywards at the moon. “I used to look up at the moon and wonder if you were looking at it at that very moment. The moon was my messenger. Each night I’d tell the moon to shine my love on you and keep you safe. You know, when I was little, I used to think the moon just followed me everywhere I went. I’d run and the moon would run with me. I’d slow down, and it’d slow down.”

“I’ll be your moon.” I squeezed his arm. “I’ll run when you run, and when you tell me to slow down, I’ll slow down. I’ll be there with you, always.”

“You’re a part of me, Mina,” he said. “I have no one else in the world but you.”

We pulled up in front of a red and white building lit up with neon lights. A young boy came up to the van to take our order. Dhaaga ordered spicy fruit chaat and two mango shakes. A brief quiet ensued as we listened to the drowsy murmur of other people talking, patches of
sentences escaping their mouths as they munched on the fruit chaat and sipped their thick mango shakes.

I convinced myself that my troubles had come to an end. Dhaaga had no way of finding out the truth about my life in Heera Mandi unless I told him, and I would never do that. Once he found a servants’ quarter, we would be man and wife: Mr. and Mrs. Sikander-e-Azam, Sikander the Great.

“Mrs. Mina Sikander-e-Azam,” I said out loud, in between sips of mango shake.

Dhaaga turned his head and let out a low laugh. “I’ve been tagged as Dhaaga for so long, I almost forgot my name is Sikander-e-Azam.”

“I’m going to call you Sikander from now on. Forget Dhaaga. That was when you were a beggar boy and had no name. You’re not that anymore. You’re my king who saved my life.”

“You used to keep asking me what my real name was,” he said in a serious tone. “I never deserved to be called by my real name Sikander the Great after running away like a coward, the day my mother set herself on fire. I’ll just be Dhaaga until the day I avenge her death.”

“How will you do that?” Why couldn’t he just try and forget the past, the way I was trying to forget mine? Why couldn’t we just plan our future and forget all about the Chaudhry?

“I don’t know, Mina, how I’ll avenge her death.” His fingers toyed with the paper straw in the mango shake. “One thing I couldn’t believe was that some whore from Heera Mandi had thrown hot oil on the old goat. It was all in the papers. I think he’s still in critical care. If I ever meet her, I’ll have to thank her.”

“What would you do, Dhaaga, if you ever met her?” I twisted my straw, bending it out of shape, the way he was doing. “She’s taken your revenge on the Chaudhry for you, so you don’t have to worry anymore.”
“I don’t think I’ll be going to Heera Mandi looking for that girl.” Dhaaga stared out the window. “Who knows what became of her? They said the Chaudhry’s thugs must have caught her and beaten her up, maybe even killed her. Who knows what happened?”

“Maybe she was really innocent and was forced into working in Heera Mandi,” I said, feeling my palms clam up. “Which girl would want to work there if she had any other choice?”

“I don’t want to spend time talking about those girls, Mina,” Dhaaga said, motioning for the boy to take away our mugs. “Their lives are rotten enough. I just hope that girl is OK wherever she is.”

Dhaaga handed twenty rupees to the young boy and pulled out of the parking area. He wanted to take me to Jinnah Gardens, a park off of Mall Road that stayed open all night, but then decided not to. He said ever since the General’s Sharia had been imposed, criminalizing any illicit sex, police were out patrolling the area, sometimes stopping young couples, asking them to show proof of their marriage. “People have even started carrying around their marriage certificates just to stay safe.”

I wondered what would have happened had I told him he was sitting next to the girl who had avenged his mother’s death. What would he have said? If I didn’t love Dhaaga the way I did, maybe I would have told him the truth and risked everything by doing so. But, life had taught me never to act impulsively, to always think things through and beware of the consequences.

We drove on Ferozpur Road and stopped at a traffic light where a boy selling roasted corn seeds pushed his cart toward our van. Dhaaga rolled down the window, and the boy twisted a square of newspaper into a cone and filled it with the corn seeds and handed it to Dhaaga, who placed a two-rupee note in the boy’s blackened hands. We drove around for a while, munching on the spicy corn seeds and laughing at the moon that came and went among the clouds,
following us. As the night deepened and traffic on Mall Road started to diminish, Dhaaga decided to head back. “I don’t want the police stopping us and asking for any identification.”

The gray smother of clouds blocked out the moon, and rain began falling, fine and windless as we drove into the shelter. Darkness stroked us as we stepped out into the playground, watery footsteps splashing in the puddles. I outstretched my arms like a bird in flight and twirled around in the blackness, casting off my burqa, letting the water soak my skin, ridding it of the hundreds of dirty hands that had prodded my body in the cheap hotels of Heera Mandi. I had returned to Dhaaga: pure, clean, honorable, my sins forgiven. Dhaaga stood in the rain, watching me, bony knuckles on hips that dared not move, as if even the slightest movement might steal the moment away.

When I entered the hut, a strong reek of wet clothes and hair followed me into the room. Except for the drone of a lone mosquito and the sound of a breath being drawn, a wet rattle, there was stillness in the night as I changed into dry clothes. I crawled onto the mattress, my soul feeling as light as the mattress I rested my weary body on. Hands cupped behind my wet head, I planned my life with Dhaaga. Everything seemed to be coming together for us. Soon we would be living in a quarter, our own little house, have children. Maybe even take them to Tobay one day. I stayed awake that night until the first gray light of dawn shone through the window.

When I awoke the next morning, the sun had already climbed the sky and turned hot. I lay sprawled on the mattress, whispering Dhaaga’s name a thousand times, waiting for him to come by the hut. A short while later, a clatter of knuckles on the door brought in a young girl who stood barefooted, hair tied in a tight braid that rested on the nape of her neck. Her mouth swung open, and she announced that Mrs. Khan had summoned me to her office. She said I was to come alone, immediately.
Huma Hassan leaned against the bamboo-shuttered window in Mrs. Khan’s office, her slim hands resting on the dusty windowsill. She was engrossed in conversation with Mrs. Khan, who sat spraddle-legged in her wooden chair. Her chubby fingers, tipped with chipped pink nail polish, tapped the large wooden table in front of her.

I stood quietly on the faded red and blue carpet, my hands jittery under the folds of my muslin veil as Huma studied me through eyes with half-moons under them, as if she hadn’t slept since the day of the protest. Her eyes rested on my face for a moment before she slid into a series of rebukes for not contacting her. “The Chaudhry is dead.” She looked me directly in the eye. “You’re wanted for murder.”

My breath stopped. I just stared back at her and then closed my eyes.

“The police know I got you out of prison, and they can have a case against me for harboring a fugitive. The Chaudhry’s son must have his thugs searching for you, and it won’t be long before they’re knocking on my door. They must have asked about you in Heera Mandi, and Jhanda will give them all the information they need. We’re both in trouble.”

“Heera Mandi?” Mrs. Khan glared at me.

I kept my head bent, not knowing what to say. Huma told me that she had had a phone conversation with Mrs. Khan regarding a camel jockey’s case she was dealing with, and that’s how she had found out that a girl by the name of Mina, supposedly Dhaaga’s sister, had been injured on her way from Tobay to Lahore on the day of the protest and had been staying at the shelter ever since.
My heart thrashed against my ribs at the thought of what the Chaudhry’s family might do now that he was dead. Even more than that, I feared Dhaaga finding out the truth about me. It wouldn’t just shatter my life; it would be the end of Dhaaga, too. First, he had lost his mother because of the Chaudhry, and once he found out I had lived in Heera Mandi, had danced for the Chaudhry and was sold to him, he would never be able to bear to even look at me. Maybe the Chaudhry’s thugs should just kill me.

“If you stay here, and the Chaudhry’s son finds out who Dhaaga is, he’ll kill him, too,” Huma said, raising her voice.

Mrs. Khan, who had been listening intently to our conversation, let out a faint gasp, as if she had seen a rat. She told Huma to take me away before the Chaudhry’s thugs entered the shelter in search of me and created trouble for everyone.

“No,” I said, finding my voice. “I need to talk to Dhaaga first. Please.”

“Huma, I want both of them out of here.” Mrs. Khan threw up her hands. “Just get out of here. I don’t want our shelter to be a bloody battlefield.”

“The Chaudhry was backed by a powerful group of fundamentalist extremists who call themselves the Sipha-Sahaba, some off-shoot of the Taliban in Afghanistan. They will never allow his murder at the hands of a dancing girl go unavenged.” Huma walked over to where I stood, knees shaking in my shalwar. “The Chaudhry’s son’s running in election to become the next Chief Minister of Punjab. If he ever found out that Dhaaga was a witness to a murder and a rape that he, the Chaudhry’s son, committed years ago, Dhaaga’s life will be over. The Chaudhry’s son knows that Dhaaga’s testimony in court can be used, and that he, the Chaudhry’s son, can then be charged for murder. But, now they’ll try and put me behind bars for hiding Mina. There’s no way they should get to you, Mina, or I’ll be in trouble, too. As long as you stay
hidden, I’ll say I don’t know where you ran away to.” She bunched her hands into tight fists. “That Chaudhry’s son has connections everywhere. He’ll buy off judges and threaten to bring them down if they don’t do as he says. How do I fight these Chaudhrys when the system supports everything they do?” Her voice softened as if she felt sorry for Dhaaga and me. “I’ll get you out of here and, hopefully, out of my life. Maybe that American taxi driver can help.”

“I have to see Dhaaga,” I begged, turning toward the entrance door.

“Dhaaga can’t save you.” Huma pursed her lips and glanced at her gold wristwatch. “Your taxi driver is in town. I’ve contacted him already, but he’s leaving for America soon. I have a plan, but you had better come along with me.” She locked eyes with mine. “I’m leaving to go to Geneva in a few weeks, and God knows what will happen to you if you’re left on your own. I’ve already been told that reporters are trying to dig out the story of what really happened that night in Heera Mandi.”

From outside the window, I saw Dhaaga pull up in his ambulance. Before any of them could say anything, I just rushed out and told him not to get out of the ambulance. I knew I had to talk to Dhaaga before Huma told him everything.

“Dhaaga!” Mrs. Khan shouted from the window. “Get in here, right now!”

I grabbed his hand just as he was stepping out of the van, and before he had a chance to ask me what I was doing, I pushed him back into the van.

“Just drive out of here,” I said, my breath coming in short gasps. “We need to leave. Just go! Just drive, Dhaaga. I’ll explain everything.”

Dhaaga reversed the ambulance out of the driveway just as Huma was coming out of the office towards us. Once we were safely on the road, he pulled the ambulance onto a side street and came to an abrupt halt. “You’re behaving like a mad woman. What’s wrong?”
I would have to tell him more lies. I hated myself more than ever now. Dhaaga didn’t deserve this. I didn’t deserve someone like Dhaaga. It was as though fate was playing games with our love. Why was it even in our stars to meet again, when the truth would kill Dhaaga? But, I had to say something. I wished he would just keep driving, but he refused to drive on before hearing what was going on. The moment I had dreaded all along had arrived. My past had come back to haunt me.

I didn’t know where to start so I told him the woman I had worked for had accused me of stealing, and now that she had found me, she wanted me arrested.

“What did you steal from her?”

“Gold jewelry, Dhaaga,” I lied and wished my life would just end there.

“What did you do with it?”

“I don’t have it, Dhaaga,” I lied again. “I never stole it. She just keeps accusing me.”

He thought for a moment, then reversed the ambulance and started driving back to the shelter. “I’ll sort it out for you, Mina.”

I grabbed his arm. “Dhaaga, that’s not all.”

I couldn’t keep lying to him. As if I had any choice. If he went back, Huma would tell him everything. He pulled the ambulance into the side street again and waited for me to say something. I didn’t know where to start, so I started at the beginning. I told him about Nazo and Aasif, and his eyes raged with anger. Then I told him about Data Darbar, about Bibi. He listened, but when I mentioned Jhanda’s name, Dhaaga jumped up in his seat. His eyes narrowed, and his body coiled like he was going to hit me. I leaned back against the door.

“I knew Jhanda,” he said, his voice thin and cold. “The rascal I worked for was his brother. Jhanda was the one who put up the money for his brother to purchase children from their
parents and then have them smuggled into the Gulf region. Don’t say you worked for Jhanda. Please don’t say it. If you were with Jhanda, you had to have gone and… worked there in Heera Mandi. Jhanda would never let a girl like you just stay out on the streets! Tell me you’re not hiding anything. I know you didn’t, you wouldn’t. It’s just that I know Jhanda would never spare any girl!”

I wished I could shake my head and tell him more lies. I wished I could say I never went to Heera Mandi, but I was near collapsing. It felt as though all breath had been sucked out of my body. Dhaaga banged his head against the car window so hard I was sure his skull would crack open.

I wanted to plead with him to forgive me, but I knew our life together was over. Even if he forgave me, I could never live with him, when he knew what I did now.

“I need time, Mina.” He was crying. “I’ll take you back to the shelter and… just need time. Jhanda forced you into Heera Mandi!” Dhaaga sprayed the words out of his mouth. “All those dirty men. That rotten slum dog! If only I’d known you were there, I would’ve gotten you out, Mina!”

“Through Bibi I met the Chaudhry of Jalalpur Sharif. He bought me from Jhanda.” The words tumbled out. I felt relieved to be finally telling Dhaaga the truth. “I was the girl you talked about, Dhaaga. I tried to run away from the Chaudhry, and I poured hot oil all over him, Dhaaga. And when I did that, I thought of you, and I thought of your mother burning herself. Now your mother’s death has been avenged. I did it for you!” I collapsed in his arms, the grief finally spilling out.

Even though I begged him not, Dhaaga turned the van around and headed back to the shelter. He needed time to think things out, he said, and the shelter was still safe for us to stay at,
at least for a little while longer. I stayed quiet, lost in my thoughts. At least I had told Dhaaga the truth. I wouldn't have to lie anymore. I didn't care what happened now. I would just trust Dhaaga.

The sun was setting, casting long shadows across the playground as we drove back to the shelter. A few children played their own version of cricket, swinging their bats aimlessly and throwing balls into the air or at each other. Dhaaga drove in silence, stopped at the gates and told me to go inside.

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” he said, his eyes avoiding mine. I knew I needed to leave him alone to sort things out. Whether he came back or not would be for him to decide.

“How dare you leave like this!” Mrs. Khan’s voice thundered across the playground.

“Where is Dhaaga?”

“I’ve told Dhaaga everything,” I said, facing Mrs. Khan as she emerged from the office, her plump figure glowing with anger.

“Huma left!” She grabbed my arm and led me back into her office. “I don’t want this shelter to be involved in any political scandal, you understand? Huma left an address for you to come to meet her.”

“Can I wait for Dhaaga to come back?” I wished I had gone with Dhaaga. God only knew what he would do now.

“I don’t want the name of the shelter linked to anything shady that might make the government shut it down. The government owns the land. What will I do once they suspect we’re harboring criminals? What do I do with all the homeless children? You tell me, huh?” Mrs. Khan
jerked her head forward, pointing a thick finger at me. “Just leave now. Huma gave me this
address where she said she’d be waiting for you until tomorrow.”

Mrs. Khan motioned to the guard to hire a rickshaw for me and gave the driver the
address that Huma had left with her. She insisted I leave the premises then pushed me into the
rickshaw as I pleaded with her to let me wait for Dhaaga to return.

In the blackness, the rickshaw darted and swerved through the traffic and lurched to a
stop outside a dilapidated four-story building with a drab gray façade.

“What area is this?” I asked the rickshaw driver, a thin man with a large white turban that
lay lopsided, in danger of falling off his small head. He seemed to be in a hurry to get paid and
leave.

“Shah Jamal. Go to building 2.” He turned his rickshaw around and disappeared into the
darkness.

Building 2 was to my left. In the dim light of the street lamp, I saw a solitary figure
watching me from the balcony. Her face was covered with a dark veil, and she motioned for me
to hurry. I ran toward the building and climbed up a filthy betel-juice stained staircase, like the
entrance to Aunty Minnie’s apartment in Heera Mandi.

The stained wooden door was left slightly ajar. I poked my head into the dark entrance
when a wrinkled hand grabbed my arm and pulled me inside. An old lady dressed in a faded gray
sari peered at me as I tried to free myself from her firm grasp.

“Finally came to your senses and decided to leave the shelter?” Huma’s shrill voice
carried across the small living room where she sat on a shabby blue sofa printed with yellow
butterflies in the center. As I had suspected, she was the woman with her face covered on the
balcony.
“So, this is the girl who’s caused so much trouble for you.” The old witch let go of my arm and stared me down. Then, as suddenly as she had pulled me inside, she raised that same arm and chucked me on my head. I nearly fell flat on my face.

“Mina must go out of the country, Aunty Mary,” Huma said. “The Chaudhry’s son will have no proof that I was harboring a girl wanted for murder.”

“You’ve dedicated your life to saving girls like Mina.” The old lady walked into her dark, dingy kitchen. “You saved my George’s life when he ran away with that Muslim girl. Who knows what might have happened to him. I’m glad I can be of some help to you after all you did for me and my son.”

“Yours was the only safe place I could think of,” Huma said. “I want her out of Pakistan once her papers are ready. Where’s Dhaaga?”

I told her I had told him everything and that I didn’t know where he had gone.

“I told Mrs. Khan to send Dhaaga here,” Huma said, her eyes following Aunty Mary as she entered the kitchen to boil water for tea. “I can use his testimony. The Chaudhry’s dead, but that son is running for the Chief Minister of Punjab. A murder case against him is all I need to bring him down.”

“I told Dhaaga about Jhanda, and now he knows I worked in Heera Mandi,” I said. “If you hadn’t shown up, I could have just stayed there.”

Huma’s eyes widened as if she couldn’t believe what I had just said. “Excuse me? Until I showed up?” She slapped a hand across her chest.

“Well, if you hadn’t, Dhaaga would never have had to know about Heera Mandi.” I knew I shouldn’t have said that but it was the truth.
Huma’s gaze shifted to Aunty Mary, who sat braiding her hair, thin lips tightly pursed, her gaze fixed on the window, as if someone was watching from outside. My heartbeat quickened. Several times I caught Huma peering at the solitary window in the room, half-expecting, I’m sure, that someone was watching us, planning his move.

Aunty Mary broke the silence. “When is that American taxi driver supposed to contact you?”

I stared at Huma. She had mentioned something about Haris at Mrs. Khan’s office. I wondered how he was linked to all of this.

Huma took out a pack of cigarettes and lit one up. The smoke wafted up over her face like a veil. “Haris and his friend are involved in making fake U.S. passports.” Huma took a sip of her tea. “Of course, they charge an exorbitant fee.” She paused for a moment to take another sip. “Haris will do anything I ask of him, as long as I keep my mouth shut about his fraud business and his trips to Heera Mandi. I told him I would hold my end of the bargain, as long as he helps me get you out of Pakistan.”

My thoughts turned to Dhaaga. What if he was late in coming to my rescue and Huma forced me to leave with Haris instead? What if I ran away in search of Dhaaga? Where would I go? He could be in Heera Mandi confronting Jhanda at that very moment, or maybe he was back in the shelter. With no money in my pocket, where would I even hire a rickshaw to take me all over Lahore trying to find him? What if he came here to rescue me and found out I wasn’t here?

“Haris is going to marry you and get you a fake tourist visa for America.”

I was too stunned to say anything.

“Without Haris’ help, you’d still be in prison.” Huma lit another cigarette, then picked off a bit of tobacco from the tip of her tongue. “Anyway, he’s terrified of his wife and daughters
finding out about you. That’s another reason why I don’t want your name in the newspapers.”

She paused again, staring at the curtained window. “Haris will get a sham divorce, marry you, and get you out of the country. Then, after you get your green card in the U.S., he’s free to divorce you. His family will never find out.”

“A sham divorce?”

“He’ll obtain fake divorce papers without the knowledge of his wife, because having more than one wife is illegal in the U.S.” Huma leaned back and crossed her legs on the sofa. “His wife doesn’t have to know, because he only has to show proof to the U.S. government that he’s divorced and free to marry you.”

“If Americans were allowed to have multiple wives, the divorce rate there might be much lower,” Aunty Mary mused.

“Where’s Haris now?” I stammered. “And what if I don’t want to go with him?”

“You don’t have a choice,” Huma answered. “He’ll have your papers ready in a few days. Until that time, you must stay here.” She patted the sofa. “I don’t want things going wrong after all the trouble of getting your papers. And remember to keep your mouth shut in America. Be grateful. You have the chance to begin a new life.”

I spent the next few days locked in Aunty Mary’s apartment, thinking about Dhaaga and where he might be. Everything was my fault. He had left Tobay because of me, and now he had disappeared again. If I hadn’t told Huma about him, she wouldn’t have needed his testimony. I didn’t want Dhaaga to help Huma, because that would be putting his life in jeopardy. I didn’t trust that Huma could keep him safe after he appeared in court to testify against the Chaudhry’s son. I just wanted Dhaaga and me to be left alone. Even if the Chaudhry’s son was put behind bars, Dhaaga’s mother wouldn’t come back. As if anybody could fight these Chaudhrys! They
had power over everything. Huma was strong, but she was just a woman. Maybe it was better that Dhaaga didn’t come here to find me. I just prayed for him to be safe and to stay away from Huma.

As if he would even come back for me now! Men like him didn’t marry whores like me.
The thing about America, according to Haris, was that you could lie about who you were and what you did when you were in your old country. Then you could also lie about everything in America when you went back home to visit your family and friends. You just had to hope that people on either side of the globe didn’t bump into each other and start exchanging notes.

So Haris had prepared to tell the American customs officer that he had obtained a divorce from his wife in Pakistan and had married me. Of course, he carried the fake divorce documents with him. Haris had also planned on telling his Pakistani and Indian cab driver friends in New Orleans that I was his niece who was here to attend college. So my life in America started with two big lies.

“Once you get your green card, this will all be over, and I can go back to living the way I used to. Hopefully, my family will never find out.” Haris tightened my seat buckle as the plane took off from Lahore International Airport in the early morning hours. I looked out the window as the airplane rose, and Lahore tilted this way and that.

After a while, staring out the tiny window, I wondered whether the plane was flying over Tobay, and Amma and Baba were pointing at it, as were all the village women washing their clothes and their buffaloes, and going about their daily chitchat by the stream. Bindi might have looked up, too, along with Dhaaga, Bibi, Peeru, Aunty Minnie, Bubbly, and Bunty. Haris said the plane would make a quick stop at Dubai en route to London and New York, and I wondered if Bubbly or Bunty ever left with the Arab sheikh. Maybe I would see them at the Dubai airport.
I would have someone to wave good-bye to then, since I hadn’t gotten to wave to anyone when I left Pakistan, except the taxi driver to the Lahore airport. He had just shrugged his shoulders, counted his change, reset his meter, and reversed his black and yellow taxi out of the parking lot. I hadn’t gotten so much as a smile or a wish for a safe trip.

I hadn’t known then that I would sit in the plane and miss him, too.

After we reached New Orleans, Haris said I should wear T-shirts and jeans and do away with my veil.

“And don’t wash your veils and hang them over the balcony to dry,” he said. I watched my muslin veil fall gently off the balcony like an angel’s broken wing, white with shimmery sequins that sparkled in the sunlight, as the veil silently descended on a skinny Habshi boy tap dancing on the sidewalk down below. “They aren’t Habhis here,” Haris would tell me later. “They’re African-Americans.” The boy, his head a mass of short, tight black curls, tripped and fell, and the small crowd watching him looked up to where I was standing. I retreated into my room, fearing the crowd would come knocking on my door, accusing me of hurting a young boy.

Haris kept saying he would take me to a laundromat to wash my clothes, but after waiting for two weeks, I tightly bundled my shalwar kameezes and my veils in a large bed sheet that I balanced on my head the way I used to balance my bundle of clothes in Tobay to take to the stream for washing, and I trotted off toward the Mississippi River. I walked past the smoky bars on Bourbon Street where we lived, music blaring through them. A few people standing by the doors, beer cans in their hands, watched me with an amused expression on their faces, their eyes focused on the bundle of clothes balanced on my head. I turned down St. Ann and crossed over to Decatur Street before heading toward the tracks for the streetcars. Crossing over the tracks, I
climbed up the wooden steps of the Moonwalk, then down the steps on the opposite side to squat by the fast-moving, muddy river. I set my laundry down, took out the white hand soap, and whomped my clothes on a large broken stone slab lying lopsided by the river.

Two yellow-haired women, their legs shamelessly uncovered, peered at me as if they had never seen anyone washing clothes before. I ignored them and just kept whomping the clothes. The yellow veil I had worn on the plane and sobbed into all the way to America got swept away by the water currents before I had a chance to retrieve it. I watched the veil float away, riding high in the water, and wondered whether it, too, had missed Pakistan as much as I did and had finally found a way back.

I felt odd the first few weeks, walking down the streets of the French Quarter without my veil covering my chest. I could feel them all watching me – the tarot-card readers and the fortune tellers sitting by Jackson Square, the artists sitting under the shade of the oak boughs, the carriage drivers with their mules dressed in straw hats, and the people sitting across the street from them at Café Du Monde, munching on sugar-coated beignets dipped in café au lait. They were staring at me, pointing fingers, and telling me in English to go home and fetch my veil. I was from Pakistan, and it wasn’t right to be Pakistani and uncovered.

As I followed Haris around the Quarter, past a man walking with a rabbit on a leash, I stared downwards at my unveiled breasts jutting out under my T-shirt, bobbing up and down like pomegranates with fiery jinns dancing inside them. I wondered whether all of America was watching my jinn-breasts, too. Sometimes, if Haris was ahead of me, I walked with my hips gyrating under my tight-fitting jeans, trying to imitate Peeru, my transvestite friend in Lahore. I smiled to myself, knowing I could walk like Peeru without anyone thinking I was a whore from Heera Mandi.
At least that was what I hoped. In Heera Mandi, I was part of the flow, just another girl wrapped in a burqa, walking the streets. I never thought of myself as an individual. But, here, walking on the narrow, uneven flagstone sidewalks of the Quarter, I often wondered what went on in the minds of the people when they walked past me. At least I had a chance to begin life anew here, but living with Haris was a constant reminder of my days in Heera Mandi.

“Think of the Quarter as Heera Mandi,” he said, as he walked alongside me one morning to the grocery store on the corner of Bourbon and Ursulines. “God knows there are enough whores and drag queens here in the French Quarter to match the numbers in Heera Mandi.”

“I’m not a whore here,” I shot back, nearly tripping over a young girl with a silver nose ring, squatting on the broken sidewalk. Her pale legs were covered with colorful tattoos resembling posters of Punjabi films pasted on the walls that ran alongside the betel-stained sidewalks of the Walled City of Lahore. “I’m your wife now,” I said, trying to keep up with Haris, who walked fast here, like an American, unlike his relaxed stroll in Heera Mandi. “I’m not a whore.”

“I only have one wife, and she lives in Lahore,” he retorted, as if he had always been faithful to her. As if he had never spent his days with me in Heera Mandi. As if he wasn’t sleeping with me anymore, even though I wished he would leave me alone, treat me like I was really his niece. So I would have the chance to be good again. So I wouldn’t have to sleep with a man whose stories of America didn’t enchant me anymore.

In Heera Mandi, I had waited for Haris to return from America and relate stories of a world that didn’t seem real. A world that I thought was as far away as India or Afghanistan. He laughed every time I said this, explaining how America was even further than the world of Sikander the Great. In America, you didn’t have to be rich to speak English. Everybody spoke
English, even babies who could barely walk. The streets weren’t choked with mounds of garbage that breathed a life of its own, even seemed to move by itself with all the rats clambering in it. Everybody had yellow-green-brown cheetah eyes like mine. I blushed every time he compared my eyes to those of Sharon Stone, an American actress, posters of whom I imagined must be pasted on billboards across America. I asked him to get me a poster of her on his next visit, so I could paste it on my bedroom wall and call her my American sister.

But, when I stepped off the plane, no one pointed at my eyes, and no one called me Sharon Stone. There were streets and narrow alleys that smelled of beer and urine. Haris had no more stories to tell and said he wished Huma hadn’t forced him to bring me to America as his fake bride. I looked forward to the times he left to drive his taxi, because that gave me the chance to walk the streets of the Quarter alone, without him nagging me about something or the other, or complaining about me or Huma and how she had found out about his fraud passport business and how she would now blackmail him for life. How he felt like Huma had freed me from prison and put him there, instead.

After a few weeks, I decided to walk from my apartment at the corner of Bourbon and Governor Nicholls Street until I reached the small park enclosed by a black wrought-iron fence at Jackson Square. I spent the afternoon sitting on an iron-framed wooden bench facing a bronze statue of a warrior atop a stallion. I felt happy here, imagining Dhaaga sitting with me, a smile playing around his lips, pointing at the statue and telling me that it was King Sikander riding his horse, Bucephalus. Haris had pointed out to me once that not every warrior straddling a horse was Sikander the Great. This was the statue of someone called Andrew Jackson, and he had saved New Orleans. Sikander the Great was better, I thought. He had conquered the world.
I wished Bibi or Peeru were with me when I passed by the sidewalk cafés, too afraid to step inside and order something for fear of people laughing at me for ordering something that wasn’t in the store. I wished there were freshly fried samosas in there and jellabis, the oil dripping through the brown paper bag they were served in. I missed the sweet aroma of halva and puri and hot buttered lentils topped with finely chopped cilantro spread evenly on a tandoori flatbread naan.

I craved Pakistani food, and I craved news, any news, of Pakistan. That wish came true the day Haris took me to the flea market and introduced me to Aunty Farida. Her faded gray eyes smiled at me, and her orangeish henna-dyed hair that she kept loosely piled in a bun at the nape of her neck reminded me of Bibi’s. She was the first Pakistani I met in America, and she had a stall in the flea market. Haris introduced me to her as his niece, and she insisted I call her “Aunty Farida.” She refused payment for the long blue cotton skirt she caught me staring at, saying it was her welcoming gift to me, and then picked up a brown handbag with the word “Goach” inscribed on the front and said that was a gift, too.

Haris smiled broadly and shook his head, as if to say “we can’t take advantage of your generosity,” but then he shoved the skirt and the bag in my hands and promised that next time we came, I would wear the skirt and carry the bag and show them both to her.

“Aunty Farida, your heart is too generous, too big, you know,” he said, his arms opened expansively. “Maybe Mina can help you here sometime. She has no green card yet, but you can pay her, you know, a little under the table.”

“My one employee is leaving. He got his work permit and started demanding minimum wage.” Aunty Farida raised her unplucked eyebrows. “You know how it is. They become legal, and their heads suddenly swell up. But, maybe it’s only fair. He was a nice Indian boy from
Kerala.” She smiled at me, revealing broken yellow teeth. “My son sometimes helps me out, but he is so busy with his studies. I don’t want to disturb him. Yes, Mina can help me.” She handed change to a girl who had just purchased a Goach bag and smiled at her, wishing her a nice day. “Why did you bring her all the way here? Are you looking for a husband for her, or does she want to study? Why did you bring this poor girl all the way here? You know how hard it was for me, trying to set up a business here—no husband, nothing—how these Pakistani men in the market used to treat me, a woman daring to open a business of her own. What if you can’t take care of your niece and she’s left on her own? Well, she’s here now, and I’m glad you brought her here to meet me,” she said in a kind tone.

“I...” Haris lowered his face, cleared his throat, and smiled weakly. “Yes, to study or something, you know. Her father just died, and there was no one to look after her, so I brought her here... to study.”

“Then she’s here on a student visa?” Aunty Farida asked, as she took five dollars for a pair of sunglasses a customer had just purchased.

More lies would have been told on my behalf had we not been distracted by the most unexpected news. A Pakistani man entered the flea market, hands flying in the air, shouting, “The General is dead! General Zia is dead!”

Aunty Farida and Haris and others sitting in their stalls turned their heads toward the entrance, their mouths wide open. “The General’s plane crashed, and several top generals and even the US ambassador and the US military attaché were killed!” he shouted in English, his breath coming in short gasps.

People emerged from behind their counters and joined the small crowd that had formed around him. The Americans were shaking their heads, asking “Which General?” but the
Pakistanis knew, and the Bengalis and Indians knew. “How?” they demanded to know. “Are you sure, brother?”

“My sister, I just talked to her, and it must be in the news here also. General Zia is dead. They are saying everybody wanted him dead, Pakistani ISI, KGB, CIA, and Indian RAW. Everybody wanted him dead.”

“Ay, why is it that every time you Pakistanis have problems, you blame India?” A skinny young boy waggled an accusing finger as he stood beside his stall selling plastic cameras and key chains with plastic alligator heads dangling from them. “Your General’s dead, and you say India did it. Always blaming us. As if Pakistan doesn’t want India all broken up. Rajiv Gandhi told your General Zia to stop supplying weapons to Sikh terrorists.”

“Sikhs want to separate from India and create their own nation. Why do you blame Pakistan for supplying weapons when everyone knows that the Sikhs have their own weapons?” retorted a Pakistani boy, his hand sweeping against stacks of five-dollar sunglasses that crashed to the floor.

“Your General Zia was supplying Sikhs with weapons.” The Indian boy handed two dollars in change to a young girl in a mini-skirt. “Have a nice day, please.”

“And you, talking like you were there with him when he did that, standing by his side saying ‘Here Sikhs take Kalashnikovs from Pakistan.’” The Pakistani boy rearranged his sunglasses and stood erect, hands planted on his tiny hips.

Haris and Roshan, a middle-aged Indian man who everybody said had a crush on Aunty Farida, interrupted before a fight ensued, saying this wasn’t about India and Pakistan. This, Roshan said was about the KGB and the CIA.
“Russians wanted him dead because he helped the Afghan mujahideen in their war against the Russians, and the CIA wanted the General dead because they accused him of supplying weapons to a fundamentalist Afghan group,” he explained in Hindi that sounded just like Urdu, so I understood.

“Or maybe someone in the army,” said Feroza, face thickly creased, hair poking through her nose like there were baby cockroaches in there with their antennas sticking out. “One of his own generals had conspired against him.”

Aunty Farida, who had been standing in the aisle, listened quietly, shaking her head and saying politics was politics. As if one General’s death would solve anything. The rich in Pakistan would get richer, and the poorer would get poorer no matter which general or ambassador was blown to smithereens. Then, nodding their heads, everybody went back to their stalls, because business was business, and the rent must be paid.

I had stood amidst the crowd, thinking nobody wanted General Zia dead more than all the women locked in prison because of his strict Sharia laws. Now that he was dead, would all those women be set free? Would those laws cease to exist? Were all those women and girls celebrating, because the General was dead? Was it wrong to celebrate someone’s death if he was a monster? What would happen now? I wished Huma were there. She would have told me what was going to happen next. I imagined her standing on a podium, saying there was justice after all. I should have been there, too, shouting alongside her, waving at the crowd.

“They are saying the plane was tilting this way, five dollars please, lurching up and down in the sky before plunging into the desert near Bhawalpur, have nice day.” The Pakistani man who had brought us the news talked again from his stall, splicing English phrases as he talked to us in Urdu.
I stood quietly by Haris as he discussed the hidden conspiracies behind the General’s death with Aunty Farida and Roshan. My heart thumped in my throat, and I wished I could tell Aunty how I had stood on a podium in Lahore, a microphone in my hands, denouncing the General’s Laws. I wanted to tell the people in the flea market that I had been in prison and had heard the cries of the women wrongfully convicted of adultery by husbands who didn’t want them anymore, who wanted their neighbors’ wives instead. I wanted to stand before the people in the flea market and tell them I had fled from Heera Mandi the night Jhanda had sold me into slavery to the Chaudhry. I wanted people to know about how his goons had caught me, raped me, and presented me before a judge, who said I had dishonored my parents and had run away with a boy, how I had been convicted of fornication. I wanted to tell all the people at the flea market what the General’s death meant to me and to my sisters in prison. But, I didn’t dare utter a word. Only Haris knew, and he had told me never to speak a word about Pakistan.

So I remained silent.

I visited Aunty Farida’s stall several times until she finally asked me to work for her, selling long, colorful cotton skirts, shawls, handbags, and wallets; plastic bracelets and necklaces; cheap watches; and key rings. I enjoyed working there, having the chance to talk to the several Pakistani and Indian women who had stalls similar to ours.

The women greeted each other every morning, set up their stalls, exchanged news of whose son or daughter was getting married or divorced or had run away with an American or was seen in public wearing a miniskirt—“She ran away when she saw me approaching, tauba, tauba—we come to this country for a better future and look how the children thank us.” I listened to their stories all the while thanking Allah that no one knew mine. To them I was Haris’
Kareem’s niece, an innocent girl, homesick for Pakistan, who had never lived on her own, had never experienced life outside of the four walls of her home in Tobay.

Aunty Farida treated me daily to homemade flatbread and lentils or mint chutney sandwiches she downed with hot milky tea that she brought along in a stainless steel thermos. She also brought along extra sandwiches and packets of juice for Tom, the homeless man who kept his clothes under the table in her stall and returned in the evenings to help her load her old van and to take his things for the night.

I met customers who came from faraway places that had names I could barely pronounce. I just smiled when they told me where they had come from and said “Pakistan” when they looked at me. I had trouble understanding their English accents. They all spoke “git mit git mit” I told Aunty Farida, feeling frustrated at not being able to understand what my customers were saying half the time. I understood broken English better than fluent English—the more broken, the better I understood it, because that meant they gestured with their hands a lot and pointed at items they wanted me to show them, making my work easier. The thin, frail-looking Chinese man Mr. Fu, whose stall was next to ours, sold Chinese figurines and ladies’ handbags. I watched his store for him sometimes and also practiced my broken English with him, feeling happy when I discovered that his English was worse than mine.

After a few months, Haris went for a visit to Pakistan and, instead of sitting home alone on the faded gray leather sofa watching American people speak English on TV, I joined Mr. Fu’s daughter Sarah, who sometimes came to help him out at his stall, and her friends at a bar.

“There are pool tables and pinball machines,” Sarah explained, as if these things made sense to me. I just nodded. She ordered wine for herself, and I let her order one for me, feeling
like I was committing a big sin, and Allah might end my life that very night. I felt nervous sitting
on a barstool for the first time. But, after I took a few sips of the red wine, a warm feeling
engulfed me as I watched Sarah and her friends chatting and laughing among themselves. A few
smiled my way. One of them, a lemon-haired boy, his face pink and hairless, asked me to dance.
He led me to the dance floor, wrapped his arms around me, saying I looked exotic.

“Look excited?” I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“That too,” he smiled, as if he was in love with me.

We danced slowly to English music, and I wished I were twirling around the room
performing the Bharatanatyam or the Kattakh.

“I dance good Indian dance,” I said, playing with his baby-soft golden hair fit for a
Medora Egg Shampoo commercial.

“Cool.” He rubbed his hands on my back, like I had a secret itch. “Maybe you can show
me sometime.”

“My husband, he say, no dancing,” I smiled.

“You’re married?” Golden boy widened his eyes.

“Yes, old wife in Pakistan, and I, new wife, here,” I said, wondering why I was telling
this man with golden hair about my marriage. Sips of wine did things to my head.

“Your husband has two wives?” he said in a rather pitiful tone, as if I must be the most
abused woman in the world. “How do you put up with that? Is that even legal in Palestine?”

“Legal?” I looked at him. Another English word added to my slowly improving
vocabulary.
He looked so sad and confused that I thought I should tell him something exciting about myself, just to cheer him up. I also made a mental note to myself to ask Dallar Man what the word “legal” meant when talking about two wives in America.

“In Pakistan I dancer,” I said, staring at my egg-shampoo-commercial boy. “Very famous. Everyone see my dance, even Minister for Sewage.”

“Cool,” he said. “A Palestinian dancer. I thought women back there just wore veils and stuff.”

“No.” I shook my head “Also many have veil off.”

“And what else do some women do there, besides wearing veils and taking them off and dancing?”

“Oh,” I said. “I kill old Chaudhry in Pakistan with hot oil for frying samosa.”

This was getting good. He stared into my cheetah eyes, and I felt like a rising star.

“Honey,” he whispered in my ear, his yellow eyebrows arched like two yellow bridges over ponds of blue water, “I live in the French Quarter. Nothing surprises me anymore. Next, you’ll say you ran away from Pakistan, because they would have tried you for murder.”

“Yes.” I was surprised. “I run with taxi driver over oceans and continents. How you know?”

“Okay, so you’re saying you killed a man and then ran across oceans and continents in a cab?” He shook his head.

We danced the rest of the time in silence. I knew he thought I was lying, making up stories. After the song, he muttered some excuse and walked off the dance floor, making me feel like the world’s biggest liar. I stood there, thinking that it was a good thing that that man hadn’t believed my story. If he didn’t, maybe others wouldn’t either, even if they somehow found out
why I had really come to America. Huma said I could be tried for the murder of the Chaudhry in Pakistan, but here I was safe. No one knew the Chaudhry or his son, or anyone else in Pakistan—Bibi, Dhaaga, my Ma, my Baba. No one knew that I had ever lived in Heera Mandi. Here, I had the chance to be innocent again, to be good again.

That night, I walked home alone to the apartment, determined to make a new life for myself, and not to miss everyone in Pakistan as much as I did. Most of all, I would try to forget Dhaaga. Maybe if I met a man in America, he might make me forget all about Dhaaga. Maybe I could fall in love all over again.
Amma and Baba had wished for a son all their lives, someone to take care of them in their old age. That wish was why Baba married for the second time, and Nazo entered and destroyed our lives. Amma used to say to be careful what you wish for because you might end up paying a heavy price for it to come true. I should have listened to her and not wished, once I reached America, to forget everyone in Pakistan, because they were a part of my past. By killing off a part of my memory, I would be killing off a part of myself.

My wish and Amma’s predictions came true when Haris returned from Lahore with a letter from Huma. I had asked him to contact her in hopes of finding out any news of Dhaaga.

“How was Pakistan?” I asked, serving the spicy chicken masala I had cooked for him.

“Pakistan was fine. Just all the political stuff. Oh, someone set off a bomb near Assembly Hall when Parliament was in session. Some young boy set off a bomb rigged to a bicycle or a wheelbarrow or something. Anyway, he killed himself, and Allah only knows how many others. Traffic was blocked for hours on Mall Road. I almost missed my flight.” Haris licked the spicy masala off his thick fingers. “Seems a lot of that is going on nowadays over there. They call it the Kalashnikov-culture. Guns and drugs being smuggled into Pakistan as more and more refugees from Afghanistan cross over the border, sick of the war.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Huma sent you a letter.”

“You met Huma? Did she say anything about Bibi or Dhaaga?”

He cleared his throat. “There is a letter, somewhere with me. I’ll give it to you.”

“You’ll have to read it to me. Tell me where it is, and I’ll get it for you.” I was excited that at least Huma had thought of me. It had been eight months since I’d left Pakistan and had
never received any news from anyone. Not that Bibi or even Amma or Baba, if they had found out where I was, could really write. But, Huma could write, and maybe she had news about all of them.

“You know it’s best for you to forget people in Pakistan. You have a chance now to begin a new life, a fresh start. Aunty Farida likes you, keeps saying how hard you work in her stall.” Haris drank water, leaving greasy curry stains on the glass.

“I can bring the letter from Huma. Of course, once you finish your dinner, no hurry,” I said, wishing he would hurry up.

He ate his meal in silence, but there was something on his mind. Either he was too tired or something bad had happened in Pakistan. No, he was just too tired, had to be, it was a long journey, flying all the way from Lahore to New Orleans. Then he stared at me in a strange way, and I knew it was something else.

“Tell me what’s on your mind,” I said, throat feeling dry. “Your family’s OK?”

“The family’s fine,” he said. “The way my wife is, I don’t even think she would care that I have you here. Always busy with her coffee mornings. My daughter, though, might be getting married soon to a doctor in Pakistan. I will arrange for them to come here. The only thing is, I told his family I’m a successful businessman in America.”

“What kind of business?” I wondered what story he had made up about what he did here. I felt a lie-connection with him that I could never feel with Dhaaga.

“I said I owned a fleet of limousines and tour buses.” Haris’ ears turned red as he washed his hands in the kitchen sink and walked over to the living room. “Maybe I should have made up a smaller lie. My father always said you should lie just enough to make it look like the truth.”
“When your daughter and son-in-law come here, you can say you lost everything and look depressed and tell them not to bother you anymore with stupid questions.” I had lied to Dhaaga so much that it came easy to me now.

“And if somebody asks, ‘Where’s your niece?’ my daughter will wonder where that niece came from.”

“Maybe you can say I was your secretary, and you passed me off as your niece because that’s how you thought of me,” I smiled.

That seemed to satisfy him, because he let out a large belch reeking of onions and garlic.

Then, as if he had run out of things to say, he turned the TV on and started flipping through the channels. I walked over to where he was sitting and handed him a mug of sweetened, milky tea. He took a few sips, put the mug down on the coffee table, quietly opened his brown briefcase that lay by the side of the sofa, and took out a white envelope.

“This is the letter,” he said quietly, avoiding my gaze. “Just a second.”

Scanning the letter, he looked up to where I sat, still watching him, half-wishing that he hadn’t opened it. Haris muttered some excuse about how Huma must have written it hastily, because the writing was barely legible, and he would have to read it to me. I knew now that his problem wasn’t anything about his family. It was something to do with me. My heart skipped a beat. Maybe something had happened to Dhaaga.

“What’s in that letter?” I said, nervously. “Read it to me.”

“It’s Bibi,” he said, clearing his throat. “Better if I just tell you now. If you hadn’t come to America, you would have met the same fate—as Bibi.”

“What do you mean?” I cried out as my hand flew to my mouth. “What’s happened to Bibi?”
“Please, I—let me just read the letter to you.” Haris put a hand around my shoulders. Then, putting the letter down, he faced me directly. “They found Bibi strangled in his apartment with a veil tied around his neck. No one knows what happened. It was in the news. Huma said the Chaudhry’s son, who’s the Chief Minister now, might have found out that Bibi had visited you in jail and had tried to help you. But, we don’t know what happened for sure. Huma says the truth will never come out. She thinks it must have been the Chaudhry’s son. Who else would want an old transvestite dead, and in such a horrific way?”

I clenched my eyes, imagining Bibi struggling for his life, his murderer tightening the veil around his frail neck. Who would have wanted to end Bibi’s life? Did he really die because the Chaudhry’s son found out that he had helped me? Was I responsible for Bibi’s death?

“If I’d stayed in Pakistan, maybe I could’ve saved Bibi. I could have done something.” My voice quavered as Haris tried to calm me down. “If Bibi hadn’t helped me, hadn’t told you about Huma, Bibi would still be alive. I’m bad luck everywhere I go!”

“Shh.” Haris stroked my hair. “Bibi wouldn’t want you to cry.”

“Bibi was like a mother to me.” Tears streamed down my face. “I wish I could have seen him, talked to him just one more time.”

Haris brought me a glass of water. He held the glass to my mouth and forced me to take a few sips, saying it would calm me down.

“Read Huma’s letter to me. I want to hear what she has to say about Bibi.” I pushed the glass away. I didn’t deserve to drink water when Bibi was lying in his grave, all because he had helped me. That must have been the reason.
Haris lit a cigarette and took a few puffs before picking up the letter again. Outside, the clippity-clop of a mule-drawn carriage sounded, along with cars stopping at the intersection. Sirens bellowed in the distance. Haris read the letter slowly, as if scared to read more bad news.

“I’m going to leave out the part about Bibi,” he said, his eyes focused on the letter. “I don’t think you want to hear all of that again. So, here’s the rest of it.”

Mrs. Khan said Dhaaga brought the ambulance back but then left and wasn’t heard from again. I don’t know where to look for him. He seems to have vanished. She said a young woman with her face horribly disfigured from acid came to the shelter asking for Dhaaga. I was wondering if you might know who she might be. She didn’t leave any name or address with Mrs. Khan.

Through my tear-wet eyes, I gawked at Haris. Who on earth was this woman, with her face burned from acid? Maybe someone Dhaaga was trying to save along with the child camel jockeys. Did he go to see Jhanda? Maybe this woman was a whore from Heera Mandi, and Jhanda had thrown the acid on her face. Dhaaga must have saved her. Haris read on.

Mina, I’m sending this letter with Haris. I know Haris will tell you about Bibi. But, I thought I, too, should let you know. It was Bibi who told Haris to contact me when you were in prison. So it’s really because of Bibi that you and I even met. My heart goes out to you. Haris told me how lonely you feel in America. It’s never easy leaving your country, your home. Not knowing whether you can ever return makes it even harder. It’s important that you don’t tell anyone about why you came there. Just try to settle down, the best you can. In time, you’ll be fine. You’re strong, Mina, the only girl I know who actually stood up to that horrible Chaudhry. You must also have heard of the assassination of the General. God only knows what lies ahead for Pakistan with all these bombings and protests going on. Every political party has their own agenda, and no one thinks about the poor people who have nothing to eat, no homes, no shelter.

Sincerely, and with all the best wishes to you,

Huma

“I’m cursed.” I stared at Haris, who quietly folded the letter and handed it to me. I watched him walk toward the balcony, smoke wafting from the cigarette in his hand. “Don’t you see? Every time I think I have a chance to be happy, something bad happens! I meet Dhaaga again, I think I’ll never leave him, and look what happens. I’m so far from him now that I don’t even think I’ll ever see him again! And, not only that, he even has a woman in his life, someone
with acid thrown on her face. He must be trying to save her. I know what, his mother burned herself, and he couldn’t save her, so now he’s trying to save this woman, the way he saved the child jockeys. He wants to save everyone, Dhaaga does!” I balled the letter into a tight knot and walked out to where Haris stood on the balcony. Tossing the letter over the black iron-lace railing, I watched it disappear into the thin mist that had crept up from the Mississippi River and settled in over the Quarter, lending it a ghostly intensity.

Aunty Farida knew something was wrong the moment I walked into the flea market the next morning. I hadn’t slept all night and had half-moons under my eyes.

“What’s the matter with you?” Aunty stood pouring a cup of steaming hot tea out of her thermos, which she handed over to me. “I know Haris was supposed to come back from Pakistan. Is everything okay? You look like you haven’t slept all night. And your hair—come here, let me tie it into a braid.” She braided my hair, pulling and twisting it until it was yanked tight at my temples. I could feel its pull at my eye corners. Aunty smoothed down stray hairs and tucked in loose pieces. She touched it flat-palmed, patting it over and over again the way my Amma used to do.

I wanted to tell her what had happened, but I didn’t know what to say. What would I tell her and everyone else in the market: that my old transvestite friend who lived in a brothel in Heera Mandi had died, and that I was crying because he was like a mother to me? Then I thought that if I only said that my mother had passed away, and left out all the other details, it wouldn’t be as if I were lying, because Bibi had been my mother in Heera Mandi.

“My mother died. Uncle Haris told me.” That was all I had to say. Aunty Farida held me next to her in such a way that I felt as if I had unburdened all my troubles onto her. I wanted to
tell her how tired I was of keeping secrets, how tired I was of thinking of myself as a cursed, 
lying beggar, a whore who had traveled from Heera Mandi to Bourbon Street. How tired I was of 
having to hide my past. But, if everyone knew, how would I be judged?

News traveled fast through the flea market about my mother dying. If I had thought I was 
alone in my grief over Bibi’s death, I was wrong. The stall owners walked over, one by one, to 
console me, to let me know that I must never think of myself as being alone. Roshan, who 
everybody said had a soft spot for Aunty Farida, came by. “I was here, working in my stall when 
I received news that my mother had died. I thought about going back to be with my brothers and 
my sister in our moment of grief, but then I thought, it’s not as if my going back will bring my 
mother back to me. So, I stayed here. This is home now, and Anwar there,” he said, pointing to a 
slim Bengali man who sold leather wallets and sunglasses, “he watched my stall for me for a few 
days until I felt strong enough to come back.”

“We are like a big family here, don’t you know?” Aunty Farida said. I told her that it was 
with Bibi’s death that I felt surrounded by friends I never knew I had. “We’re all from different 
countries, and we don’t have our families here, so we just form our own family. We have our 
fights—tu tu mein mein—and there are some we don’t like,” she said, gesturing subtly to the 
Pakistani boy selling watches and handbags. “He used to lower his prices so much that all the 
tourists went to him until we were forced to match his prices and ended up not making enough 
profit. Finally we complained to the director, and I heard some of the men confronted him 
personally, too, if you know what I mean. Yes, it’s not as if one has to like everyone in their 
family.”
“Ay, Farida.” Feroza, nose hair poking out, walked over with a cup of tea in her hand.

“Why not have a Qur’an Khawani at our mosque? Pray for Mina’s mother. It’ll bring some peace to her, poor thing.”

Aunty Farida nodded. The thought of a prayer session for Bibi sounded comforting to me. I hadn’t read the Qur’an, hadn’t said my prayers in such a long time that just the thought of sitting with a group of women and reading the Qur’an and praying for Bibi’s soul instilled a sense of peace within my heart, as if I was giving back in some way for all the times Bibi had looked out for me. He had visited me in prison and had died because of it. Maybe Bibi, in death, was still looking out for me. His spirit was guiding these people to reach out to me and take me in as he had all those years ago.

“I’ll ask Haris to arrange for the prayer session at the mosque. I’ll have the women bring over some samosas and sandwiches to eat afterwards.”

So, at the end of the week, about twenty people gathered together late at night at the mosque, after closing their stalls and loading up their vans for the night. The whitewashed mosque was a two-story house that had been converted into a place of worship. Located just off of St. Claude, the mosque was easily accessible for the people who owned businesses in the Quarter. This was the place where Haris, with the other cab drivers and shop owners, spent several of his evenings, catching up on the general chit-chat, how business was, immigration issues, news from home. Most of the women, though, just came for the Friday afternoon prayer and left shortly afterward. Imam Brother Hameed, a Sudanese, would say the closing prayer for Bibi after we had recited the Qur’an.
I had looked forward to that night, except that Haris seemed agitated when Aunty Farida and I entered the mosque, carrying a big foil tray of samosas and a big stainless steel thermos of hot tea. Haris was by the main entrance, engrossed in a conversation with Roshan.

He cut his eyes in my direction as Aunty and I took off our shoes outside the mosque and placed them on the rickety wooden rack to the left side that contained women’s shoes. We entered the mosque barefooted, put the tray and the thermos on a folding table that had been laid out for the evening, and walked quietly toward the room in the back, designated for women only.

Sitting cross-legged on the gray carpet, I thought of all the people who had gathered together to pray for Bibi. Some of them weren’t even Muslim, such as Mr. Fu and a few American women who knew Aunty Farida. She pointed out Tom, the homeless man, who had taken off his shoes and sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor with the men, his eyelids drooped, dust-caked hands folded on his scrawny lap.

“I hope no one kicks him out—he smells quite bad,” Aunty whispered, her head lowered, gazing at his toes sticking out through his torn socks.

“They all know him. He’s by our stall every day. No, I wouldn’t worry about anyone kicking him out. But, I don’t know, I mean he must’ve been kicked out of places before, so I can’t say.” I thought of the time that security woman carrying a bamboo stick had kicked me out of Data Darbar.

“Do you have a photograph of your mother to show us?” whispered Feroza, as I sat beside her, a copy of the Qur’an in my hand.

“No,” I whispered, wondering how they would react if I had brought along a photograph of Bibi to show them. I imagined somebody screaming, “Mina’s mother was a drag queen!” and
rushing madly out of the mosque. No, I thought, if there was anything I was relieved about at that moment, it was that I didn’t carry a photograph of Bibi.

Haris left early after the prayer, saying he had a headache and needed some rest. A few of the women stayed back with Aunty Farida and me to help clean up after everyone had helped themselves to the samosas and sandwiches that they had downed with the sweetened milky tea Aunty had brought along. I felt loved and comforted, as if finally I had a family of my own who would be there to protect me and take care of me as one of their own: a family that had come together at my moment of grief. This prayer session, for which everyone closed down their stalls and walked over to the mosque and consoled me after the prayer, had all been done on my behalf. I was important to them.

Late that night, Aunty Farida offered me a ride in her van and dropped me off by my apartment. I walked up the creaky wooden stairway, hoping Haris would be fast asleep and not bother me with whatever was on his mind at the mosque. I had just opened the door when Haris’ voice thundered loudly across the living room.
“Who have you been talking to about how you got here?” Haris sat on his creaky chair at the kitchen table, eating me up with his eyes.

“Nobody,” I said, still standing by the door. “Why would I spill out all my secrets?”

“Someone’s found out about my marriage to you.”

“I know better than to say anything to anyone.” I walked across to where he sat in the kitchen.

“Somebody told my wife in Pakistan that I have a woman here.” He buried his head in his hands. “She called me, screaming like a bitch, and now she’ll get me into trouble if anyone finds out I got a sham divorce. They can put me in prison. I didn’t even think she’d care, the way she treats me when I’m visiting!” He fumbled in his coat pocket for a cigarette.

Maybe I had said something when I went to that bar one time and told that egg-shampoo-commercial-boy that I was married. I know I had told him about running away to America, but would he really have remembered?

“Maybe one of your cab driver friends said something.” My voice was a thick whisper. “You said they knew your family in Pakistan. Maybe they said something about your niece here, and your wife caught the lie.”

“Someone told her I have a woman here, and the bitch is going crazy. My daughter’s saying she doesn’t care for my dollars anymore, that she doesn’t want to marry that doctor because she loves a stupid math tutor I hired for her.” Haris walked to the window, smoke wafting from his mouth. “He has no money, and she wants to marry him. All this work I did for them, so they can live a good life in Pakistan, and now, just because they think I have a woman
here, I get this shit from them. My daughter told me to take my dollars and flush them down my American toilet. My wife said I should flush myself down the toilet. Women! Damn bitches.” He flicked the cigarette butt onto the cement floor of the balcony, squishing it with his foot. “Always complaining!”

I walked over to Haris, tried to console him, to say something, but I was at a loss for words.

“If I’d never met you, all of this would never have happened. Allah is punishing me for entering a filthy place like Heera Mandi. He’s punishing me.” Haris buried his face in his hands.

“You said once my green card comes in, you can divorce me and tell your wife you never married me,” I spoke hurriedly, trying to calm him down. “Huma said a sham divorce means that in Pakistan you’re still married. Only in America does it say you divorced your wife to marry me.”

“So?” He looked at me.

“So tell your wife that whoever told her about me is a big fat liar.” I hoped he would see that this was not my fault. Anybody could have said anything. “People lie all the time, even your best friends. I swear I didn’t tell anyone we were married.”

He walked into the living room and sat back on the sofa. “I don’t give a damn anymore about what Huma might do. She had threatened to go to the authorities and report my fake passport business if I didn’t bring you here, didn’t help you out—damn women—and this one’s a lawyer!”

“What will you do?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He sighed deeply, shaking his head. “I have to go to Pakistan to drum some sense into my wife’s head before she goes to the authorities. Bitch, all the money I made
from those passports for her and my two daughters.” He tugged at his hair as if he wanted
desperately to yank it out of his scalp. “And my stupid daughter, all this love shove nonsense
with that tutor! How do I make her see she should be marrying the doctor?”

“You can’t go back now.” I didn’t know what else to say. I didn’t want him to leave me
there by myself. “What if they arrest you in Pakistan and don’t let you come back?”

“They can put me in jail here, too, if the immigration authorities find out.”

“Maybe your wife won’t say anything.” I wished he and I had never met in Heera Mandi.
I felt sorry for him. He had worked hard for his family, and now they might abandon him, might
even report him and have him arrested, all because of me. “You helped get me out of prison. I
can never forget that,” I spoke softly. “And you married me, even though Huma had threatened
to go to the authorities and expose your fraud business if you didn’t. You did help me all the
same. I can never repay you for all of that. I will never forget it. I’m not thankless like your wife
and your daughters.”

“My older daughter is thankless,” he shot back. “The younger one, thanks to me,
wouldn’t know.”

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that but decided it was better not to risk annoying
him any more than he already was.

Haris went into the bedroom, and I heard him drag out his suitcase from under the bed. I
stayed outside on the balcony, the sound of trumpets and drums drifting from the bars on
Bourbon, as I sat on my rickety chair, wondering what would happen now. How ironic it was
that the day I felt comforted, felt I had friends who would make my life easier and make me feel
at home here, was the day Haris had to leave.
When I woke up the next morning, he was already gone. That morning, clouds gathered up, and a wind blew, and rain fell hard and steady with no sign of stopping. I lay curled up on the sofa, hoping for Haris’ sake and for mine that his wife would forgive him before it was too late.

It was two weeks later, the night before Mardi Gras day, that I headed toward my apartment, hoping to catch a few hours of rest before the long carnival day ahead. I had stayed busy. Aunty Farida made me put in extra hours at the flea market during Mardi Gras season. This was moneymaking time for all the business-owners in the Quarter, and we were no exception. Aunty easily pulled in eleven, twelve hundred dollars each day for that whole week. Aside from the extra money that I earned, the extra work also helped take my mind off of Haris’ problems and what would happen to me in case he didn’t return.

After closing down the stall that night, I walked over to catch a glimpse of the lavishly decorated Mardi Gras floats rolling down Canal Street. I even managed to catch a few gold, purple, and green beads and plastic mugs thrown my way. The crowd reminded me of the urs of Data Sahib when thousands gathered in the Walled City to commemorate the death anniversary of the saint. It was a busy time for us, the whores of Heera Mandi, when many prayed all day and visited us at night. Walking away from the crowd, gold plastic beads dangling down my neck, I wondered how much money the whores of the Quarter would be pulling in nowadays. I couldn’t help but think how many dollars I could have made had I allowed myself to be a whore here for just this week of Mardi Gras. God only knew I could have used the extra money. Aunty Farida still paid me below minimum wage, and I never had any money to buy a new dress, or make up. I was tired of counting every penny.
I pulled out the stack of mail from the bronze mailbox at the bottom of the stairs leading to my apartment and walked up the wooden planks that creaked beneath my weight. I unlocked the front door, grateful to have some time to myself. Stretching my legs out on the gray sofa, I sorted through the mail. There was one letter addressed to me, with Pakistani postage and no return address. I tore open the envelope. It contained a single page of blue-lined paper, frayed at one edge, as if someone had hastily torn out the paper from a notebook. A small note was scrawled on the outside of the folded paper in Urdu: “Make sure you’re alone when you read this.”

This had to be from Haris. I almost felt like tearing the letter up, pretending I had never stepped into the apartment, never checked the mail. I was too far away from Pakistan to worry about Haris.

His handwriting was surprisingly neat. The words scrawled in plain Urdu were easy for me to read.

Mina,
I’m stuck in Lahore Central Jail. Never mind the sordid details—my wife and my daughter went crazy, thought I would desert them or something because someone told them I had a woman here, and the rest is history. The police were already waiting for me when I reached the Lahore airport. My wife must have told them I was coming. I contacted Huma, and I need her help. I need money, too, to pay her to get me out of here. You were here, in this very jail, and you know exactly what it’s like.
I risked my family finding out about you, but I still got you out. Now it’s your turn. My youngest daughter has been confined to a wheelchair ever since she was very young. She was in a motorcycle accident with me years ago and needs constant, costly medical supervision, all thanks to me for making her ride with me, against my wife’s wishes.

I stopped reading the letter. Dallar Man had never mentioned that his youngest daughter was in an accident that he was responsible for. His wife must have hated him all these years for what had happened to their daughter. No wonder he spent his days with me in Heera Mandi. He
had kept his worst nightmare from me and told me stories he should have been sharing with his
daughters.

I know I can’t come back to the U.S. now. But, I have left something back there that, in my hasty
departure, I neglected to bring with me. I was naïve enough to think I would straighten
everything out with my wife and go back. Anyway—and read this carefully—I have stashed away
gold jewelry and ten thousand dollars in cash in a steel box under the wooden plank beneath the
fridge. I need for you to bring it all here. If the customs officers ask you anything, just say you
are attending a wedding in Pakistan. Anyway, customs people know that Indian and Pakistani
women wear a lot of gold jewelry, and they shouldn’t be suspicious. Once you reach Lahore,
wait at Huma’s house for my wife, and give everything to her. Huma has her contact number.

Use the cash that I have to purchase a ticket to Pakistan. Don’t be stupid and buy a first
class ticket. Remember the money is mine. Give Aunty Farida some excuse of having to go back
to Pakistan. You try and stay there, and the immigration authorities might get after you, too. You
are, after all, my wife in the U.S. I trust you to help me. I don’t have a choice. I know I can trust
you to do the honorable thing.

Yours sincerely, very, very dearly,
Haris Kareem

P.S. I paid the landlady two months advance rent before I left. Besides the money and the gold,
there is nothing of much value in the apartment. I know I won’t be able to come back to
America—though once I’m out of jail, who knows? Anyway, the landlady will probably rent out
the apartment once the two months are over. You don’t need to tell her anything about me.

For a long time, I sat with my head bent to my knees, not knowing what to do. Maybe
Aunty Farida could help if I told her only about Haris’ passport business and said that he had
arranged for a fraud passport for me, too. I knew there were several people working at the flea
market who were here illegally. I could ask Aunty Farida how they managed to stay here. I could
even pay someone if I had to, now that I had the money that was stashed under Haris’ fridge.

But, if I decided not to go back to Pakistan, then Haris’ crippled daughter would suffer,
too. Without Haris’ dollars, she might be cast out on the streets, a helpless child in a wheelchair,
begging on the streets. If I went to Pakistan, I could search for Dhaaga without letting Huma
know, too. Did he ever think of me? Even if he hadn’t forgiven me, I could at least try to see him
one more time.
My gaze fell on the fridge, purring in the corner of the tiny kitchen like a content cat. It must have felt full and satisfied with all the money and gold stashed underneath it. A part of me decided that if Haris was telling me the truth about his daughter, then I should forgive him for his fake passport business and all the times he had shouted at me in this apartment. In all the years I had known him, he had never cried about his problems or mentioned the guilt he felt for having crippled his own child.

Now Haris needed my help, not the other way around. He was stuck, and I was the only one who knew about his money and jewelry. What if I kept it all stashed away until I was sure I knew what to do? Once I left for Pakistan, who knew if I could ever come back? What if the police arrested me the way they had arrested Haris at the Lahore Airport, and I landed back in Lahore Central Jail with no hope of ever getting out? Who would help me this time? Bibi was dead, and Huma wouldn’t help me, knowing what the Chaudhry’s son, the Chief Minister now, had done to Bibi for having helped me.

Slowly, I slipped off the plastic gold beaded necklaces I was wearing, rose from the sofa, and walked toward the fridge, as if I were walking toward my own destiny. My breath caught in my throat as I dragged the fridge forward, careful not to let it fall flat on the floor. Lifting two wooden planks from under the fridge, my hands reached down for a small square steel box. A strange sensation hung over me as I opened the box and gazed at the beautiful gold bangles with intricate floral designs shining through a clear plastic bag. Another bag contained gold rings and chains. I opened the bags, carefully placing the gold on the wooden floor, feeling something tingling in my stomach, in my scalp, as I sat staring at the shiny gold. Then one by one, I slipped the rings on my fingers. They fit perfectly. I felt the thickness of the chains as I placed them around my neck, letting them gently dangle over my collarbone and slip teasingly down to my
breasts. I wore them for my Amma. She said she had dreamed of the day I would get married with sets of gold necklaces around my neck and rings on my fingers. Then she had laughed each time, saying she would be lucky if she could afford to give her Mina just one ring or gold chain. Look, Amma, I wanted to say. Look at your Mina, now. She’s laden in gold. All this is for you, so your dreams can come true. So you can see me shining wherever you are.

Two gold necklace sets lay beside the bangles. One was inlaid with rubies, and the other was plain with a locket hanging from it. My teeth chattered, and sweat slid down my armpits and my back as I lifted the necklaces and clasped them around my neck. I slid the bangles, one by one, on my arms, shaking them to hear their jingle—the jingle of real gold—a rich jingle, not the clinking of the cheap glass bangles I had worn and danced in at the brothels of Heera Mandi.

My knees wobbled as I stood up and, wrapped in gold, walked over to the mirror in the bedroom, as if the weight of the gold and the money—the money. I went back, reached down, and picked up the stacks of green bills neatly packed in bundles secured by rubber bands. I carried them to the dresser and laid them out in rows, and stood before the mirror and gazed at my own reflection. Dhaaga was standing behind me, admiring me. I felt Dhaaga’s breath on my neck, the moisture of his mouth lingering on the necklaces, like dew drops on grass of gold.

My fingers toyed with the locket hanging from the gold necklace. I opened the locket, revealing a faded black and white photograph of a young boy and an older woman, presumably the boy’s mother, standing next to him. Maybe it was Haris and his mother. Maybe that was the only photograph he had of his mother and him together.

I gazed at it for a long time. The woman wore her hair in a long braid like my Amma used to. If I had had a brother, he might have resembled the boy in the photograph. My grandma always kept the two gold bangles in her possession in a steel box buried in the dirt floor under
her bed. Haris had done the same. He had hidden his gold and his money for his daughters and the photograph for himself.

Fear seized me, engulfed me, bringing me to my feet. None of this was mine to keep. Amma would have spat on my face if she found out that I had thought of keeping something that wasn’t mine. Something that belonged to the man who had helped free me from prison, the man who had flown me across oceans and continents, to a world I hadn’t even been sure existed, just for my own safety. The man who was now behind bars because his wife had found out about me. I was responsible for Haris’ misery, and now I was trying to steal his gold and his money and cast his crippled daughter out on the streets!

I had lost my honor. I knew now what Amma meant when she said lose your honor, and you might as well be dead. I deserved to die if I even took so much as a ring or a necklace from Haris. Taking the gold off and placing it on the dresser next to the stacks of green bills, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Straightening my shoulders, I gazed into my own cheetah eyes that held a glint of pride in them, because I knew now that I was going to do the right thing, the honest thing. I was going to help Haris instead of creating more trouble for him, the way I had created trouble for Dhaaga. They were the only two men who really cared for me, and all I had done was bring misery into their lives.

But, now things were different. I had made a decision that would affect someone else’s life for the better. I put the cash and the jewelry in the steel box, ashamed of ever having thought of stealing something that belonged to Haris’ daughters. Placing the box safely under the wooden planks, I dragged the fridge back and stepped out to the balcony, gazing upward at the dark, silent sky, wishing it would reach down and protect me, carry me safely back to Lahore, because I had made an honorable decision, and I felt strong because of it. I had survived. I had seen
hunger, been mistreated, my body sold a thousand times, but with each knock on my head, with each powerful wind that rushed to silence me, I burned like a dancing flame, getting stronger and stronger each day.
Hidden within the confines of a dusty black burqa, I stood facing the centuries-old domed building. The words “Central Jail” were painted in black across the large wrought-iron gates. I had arrived in Pakistan three days ago and was staying with Huma, who insisted I stay in the servants’ quarters, because she was leaving for Geneva for two weeks and didn’t want me in the main house by myself.

My eyes, caged between two lace-covered openings, peered at the four uniformed guards in gray turbans, heavy rifles slung over their shoulders. They directed visitors to a line against the building wall leading to the prison gate. I remembered how Bibi had visited me in jail, always bringing fresh mangoes and a basket of pink rose petals with him. He said he had purchased the rose petals from the shop in the old graveyard on his way to the prison. I told him I was in jail, not buried in a graveyard. Bibi said being in a prison was like being buried alive, and anyway, he hoped the smell would take away the awful stink in my cell. I never told him that the petals tasted sweet and had become a favorite dessert for my barrack mates and me.

I wondered now, as I stood in line with the other visitors, whether I should have bought pink rose petals for Haris. I recognized one of the women guards who stood in the check-in line. She was dressed in a blue shalwar kameez, her fat fingers planted on her hips, the same fat fingers that had searched every nook and cranny of my body. I kept my head covered in the folds of my burqa and said I was Haris Kareem’s daughter. She let me in.
Haris’ face sagged with weariness, and his black bird eyes with dusky circles around them held an expression of complete disbelief that I had actually ventured halfway across the world to help him. His weight seemed to have stumbled off him, and the hair that he dyed religiously with Kala Kola Black Hair Color was now silvery-gray and thinning at the temples. His scraggly salt-and-pepper beard covered his round dimpled face and reached well below his neck. He looked like Mullah Ishmail, who taught boys at the Islamic madrassa in Tobay.

“You received my letter,” he acknowledged feebly.

I nodded, my face now uncovered after I had been checked through security. I wanted to offer Haris some kind of hope, some words of comfort as his weary eyes searched my face. There was no need to ask him how he was being treated here. I already knew. In hushed tones, I told Haris that I had brought the gold and the money and had left everything with Huma. I needed to contact his family soon so they could get the money needed for his handicapped daughter. I didn’t want to leave everything to Huma. She might put off doing anything for Haris until she had some free time.

“124 Tollinton,” Haris said, his shoulders stooped, eyes scanning the room. “They live on the street across from Tollinton Market. Tell my wife that Huma sent you. Please don’t tell my wife who you are.” He shifted in his chair. “Just say you work for Huma, and she has sent you to fetch the… lamb chops I sent.” He lowered his head further. “I promised Huma three lamb chops to get me out of here.”

I nodded in silence, letting him know that I would take care of everything. As I opened my mouth to speak, my stomach clenched, then suddenly twisted, like a prison rat had entered my body and was scampering for food.
“Haris, I must have eaten something bad, or maybe I’m just too nervous sitting in jail.” I covered my mouth with the burqa. “Huma told me to be careful, not to eat anything from hawkers outside.” I swallowed hard. “But, I ate chana chaat in tamarind water.”

“I’m sorry about Dhaaga,” he said quietly.

“Sorry?” I squeezed my stomach, hoping the cramps would go away.

“Huma didn’t tell you?”

“What?” I felt vomit rising in my throat.

“He married that girl, the one with the burnt up face, and moved back to Tobay with her.”

My body convulsed, vomit splattering all over my burqa. I thought I would choke and collapse right there. The guards screamed, yelling for me to get my filthy self out of there. I rushed out of the room, soiling myself and leaving a stinky trail behind me.

Once I was outside the prison gates, I tore off my burqa, turned around and flung it, vomit and all, at the looming, blood red iron gates. Collapsing to the ground, hot tears streaming down my face, I beat my chest so fiercely that two women waiting in line to pass through the prison gates tried to soothe me.

“Poor thing, don’t worry. Allah will help you. My husband is inside, too. I travel every day just to see him.”

I had soiled my shalwar and stank of shit and filth. Haris’ words about Dhaaga pounded in my head. As if I had stood a chance against any woman, once Dhaaga learned of my past.

“Go home. You can’t do anything but pray.” One of the women grasped my arms with her wrinkled hands, trying to help me stand up. I brushed away strands of hair, raising a hand in
a lame effort to hail a rickshaw. The drivers slowed down, crinkled their noses, and drove off in puffs of dust that covered my face like the layers of powder on the faces of drag queens.

The clippity-clop of a donkey-cart resounded in my ears. A skinny, turbaned man with a white beard, the ends dyed bright red with henna, brought his skeletal donkey to an abrupt stop. I reached into my bra and pulled out a hundred-rupee note—courtesy of Haris-converted dollars. The driver smiled, the grime cracking on his face.

“Upper Scotch Corner.” I hoped I wouldn’t throw up on the man or his donkey.

“Donkey carts aren’t allowed in that area.” He clucked his tongue, and the wretched-looking donkey reluctantly raised his head.

“Data Darbar.” Donkey carts were a major mode of transportation there.

I climbed into the creaky cart, pushing aside brown sacks of potatoes and onions. The bumpy ride made my stomach churn, and I splattered vomit all over the vegetables. The old man glared at me. I dove my hand into my bra and shoved another hundred-rupee note into his hand.

Dodging the chaotic traffic on Jail Road, the donkey cart rattled its way into the Walled City. The last amplified strains of the muezzin’s calling the faithful to prayer hung in the air. It was just after sunset, and the light was still golden and pink around a large margin of the sky. The fat domes of Badshahi Mosque glistened at the edge of the Walled City like juicy onions. I felt too weak to sit, so I stretched out on my back, listening to the familiar roaring sound of speeding rickshaws and motorcycles and the blaring horns of cars and vans, and inhaled the acrid smell of the burning fires under pots filled with oil for frying samosas and pakoras. I smiled to myself: I was home. These were the sounds, the smells of Pakistan that I had missed. Then I threw up again.
As the donkey-cart halted near the entrance to Data Darbar, the driver climbed down and dragged me out of the cart. I could barely walk and sank to my knees as the worst cramps I could imagine seized my body, making me convulse more.

Things started to go black. I tried to keep my eyes open, but my head felt groggy, my body heavy, as if it were sinking under its own weight. After some time, I heard voices around me, and I tried to open my eyes again but was unable to resist the returning drowsiness and fell into a stupor of exhausted sleep. I dreamed of the woman Dhaaga had married. Her face was disfigured from acid. The woman transformed into a jinn, her long black tresses spread around her like branches of a pomegranate tree. I dreamed of Dhaaga and me holding hands, fetching water from the well behind our house in Tobay. Dhaaga was chasing me with a bucket in his hand, splashing water on me as I ran through yellow cornfields now transformed into the beautiful garden by Jackson Square in the French Quarter. The garden was filled with drag queens dressed like yellow and purple petunias, stomping their shiny green platform shoes in puddles of rainwater that had collected around the statue of Sikander the Great atop his black stallion. The statue suddenly came to life as water poured in from the Mississippi River, flooding the French Quarter. Warrior Sikander and his horse rose up in the air while down below the drag queens screamed to him for help. Sikander fought the water with his bare hands until the flood slowed down to a trickle, and the people gathered around Sikander the Great, thanking him for saving their city. I was there, too, and when I looked up, I saw that Sikander the Great was really Dhaaga. He had come to New Orleans to save me.

I woke up from the dream I had been awarded as something cold and wet trickled down my face and neck. I cracked my eyelids, blinking a few times, trying to focus on a blurry silhouette kneeling beside me, mopping my brow with her veil.
“Take another sip of mint water.” The old woman gently raised my head, placing a spoonful of greenish water next to my lips. “At least you’re drinking now. We thought you were dead.”

“How long have I been here?” I asked in a faint voice. “And where am I?”

“Data Darbar.” She smiled a toothless smile. “Somebody saw you passed out in your own filth late last night.” She squatted beside me, adjusting a stained veil over my head. “We thought you had died from an overdose of heroin. So many girls are doing that now.” She paused as the call for prayer sounded over the loudspeaker. “You were still breathing, so we brought you inside and prayed to Data Sahib that he may help you come to your senses.” She furrowed her eyebrows. “Who are you? One of the women here said she remembers you from somewhere.”

“Upper Scotch Corner,” I mumbled, hoping no one remembered me begging on the streets or working in Heera Mandi.

After two days of sipping mint water and eating boiled white rice, I felt strong enough to leave the shrine. I placed a fifty-rupee note in the hand of the old woman and hailed a rickshaw to take me to 124 Tollinton.

Sitting in the rickshaw as it swerved through traffic, my head felt heavy, my throat parched. I knew I had to focus on helping Haris. After that, I would go to Tobay. Haris had said that Dhaaga had moved with his wife to Tobay. I had to see for myself whether Haris had told me the truth about Dhaaga having married that woman. I wanted to see my Amma, Baba, and Bindi. It was time they learned the truth about what had really happened, how Nazo and Aasif had tricked me into leaving Tobay. I wondered what had happened to Nazo in all those years. Wherever Nazo was, at least she had Aasif to take care of her.
The rickshaw lurched to an abrupt stop outside a small, whitewashed townhouse, with an overhead cement balcony along which someone had hung her washed veils. A young girl answered the door. She was, around seventeen or eighteen with braided, long black hair and a round, dimpled face with a cleft chin like Haris’.

“Ma, one of the cleaning girls is here.” She turned her head and shouted across the dark narrow hallway. “Ma said you could do the washing first and then clean inside. Go around the back.”

“I’m not a cleaning woman. I… I didn’t have time to dress properly.” I looked down at the tattered veil and the over-sized wrinkled clothes the old woman had given me. “Are you Haris Kareem’s daughter?”

“I don’t know anything about what he might have done.” Her round face grew dark. “I know all the neighbors are talking about him. Which one of them sent you to find out more gossip?”

She attempted to shut the door in my face. I stuck my foot in the doorway.

“I’m here to help you, and… your father always took care of you.”

“We don’t need anybody’s help.” A woman, ample-haunched, dressed in a shalwar kameez that had once been a print of little flowers now faded into what seemed like a tiny scribble, came strutting down the stairs. “Shut the door, Faiza. Go change your sister’s bed sheets. She wet them again.” Then she glared at me. “What do you want?”

“I know Huma Hassan. I don’t look like it right now, but I do work for her.”

“Huma Hassan?” She raised her thick eyebrows, her uncombed hair the color of crows’ wings. “The lawyer?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m feeling a bit weak. May I come in?”
The older woman’s narrow, kajol-smudged eyes held mine for a moment. Entering through the doorway, I walked across the cement floor into a small living room. Shafts of the sun’s morning rays filtered through the white lace curtains, dappling the pink sofa. It had a plastic cover that made a squeaky sound as I sat on it.

“Haris shipped this sofa from America. It’s very dusty in Lahore, so I keep the sofa zipped up.” She leaned against the wall, arms folded across her chest.

I smiled weakly. I was an intruder in her house—the other woman—sitting on her sofa while her husband sat in jail. I wanted to apologize to her for marrying her husband, even though it was a fake marriage, but then I caught sight of her big round toe with tufts of coarse black hair sprouting from it like the muzzle of a Kalashnikov, ready to shoot bullets in my face.

“Huma said you must visit her at once.” I almost sneezed, because the air was full of hovering dust motes. “Haris had a friend bring gold jewelry and dollars that he saved for you, and now you must help him get out of prison.” I paused.

“Who brought over all the jewelry and the money?” the woman said, squinting suspiciously.

“First, you must visit Haris and apologize for believing all kinds of nonsense about him.” I straightened my back. “Huma said to tell you that.”

The sound of a child’s low wail emerged from the hallway. The young girl who had answered the door wheeled in a younger girl, a slight child, with thin ankles and protruding shoulder bones. She stared at me, expressionless, from eyes as brown as walnuts set deep in her head. A thread of spittle attached to her chin, wetting the veil draped across her bony chest.
“This.” Haris’ wife pointed a chipped-nailed finger at the sick child. “This is why I can never forgive him. I told Haris not to take her on motorcycle rides, but he never cared. Now, my whole life, I worry about what will happen to her when I’m no longer here.”

“Huma said to tell you that Haris has worked hard to provide for all of you.” I was surprised at my own firm tone. “You never had to leave your daughter to go work outside your home, and now you’re cursing him. You’ve cursed him all your life. No wonder he never wanted to stay in Pakistan.” My voice got louder as I defended Haris. “No wonder every chance Haris got, he ran back to America—to earn more dollars.” I wished I could say he spent time with me in Heera Mandi just to escape the misery at home but knew better than to say something stupid at a time like this.

“How do you know so much about my husband?” asked his wife.

“I don’t,” I stammered. “I’m just saying things Huma told me. She and Haris had talked about everything, and she said Haris swore he never had a woman in America and that he just wants to come back to his family.”

“Huma told you all that?” she asked, a note of surprise in her voice.

“Huma said Haris loves you, and she said he’s saved all that money and the jewelry for you. But, you need to see him in prison and forgive him for what happened to your daughter.”

The woman’s eyes brimmed with tears. “You don’t know what I go through every day with my daughter. Haris has taken care of us, and I don’t want to lose him. How would I take care of my daughters without his help? But, you don’t know what I went through when that friend of his said there was someone there with him.”

“Who told you that?”

“This woman I know whose husband knows Haris in New Orleans.”
“He must have been lying. Go see Haris now. You have to forgive him.” I turned to take my leave. “Forgive him for the sake of your children.”

“His friend really did bring all the money and the gold for me?” she said from behind.

“I promise you he did.” I stood by the door.

“Have you ever met Haris?” She locked eyes with mine. “You seem to have a soft spot for him, the way you’re defending him.”

“I’m just doing my job,” I said, walking out the door. “He’s worked hard for his family, Huma said. And you need him for your children.”

“You’re so young, and you speak like someone who’s seen more than her years would allow.”

“You should take care of Haris,” I said, “and help him get out of prison, so your children have a roof over their heads. So they don’t have to beg on the streets.”

I left that day, hoping I had been able to help Haris get out of jail, the way he had helped me.
While devising a plan to attack the Hindu Prince Porus and conquer India, Alexander the Great had camped around the Jhelumn River, south of my village of Tobay. Centuries later, an overloaded white and red bus painted with brown-striped roaring tigers carried passengers inside and on the rooftop from Lahore to Jhelumn City. The bus broke down while crossing the Jhelumn River Bridge.

Moments later, I squatted by the side of the bus, watching women entertain their children by inventing games and drawing pictures in the dust. Some slept, nestled in their mothers’ scrawny laps. Vendors, their hands corded by prominent veins, besieged the stranded passengers with stacks of bananas blackened in the sun and ripe yellow mangoes in baskets on their heads. I watched as they tried to balance their loads, walking downhill to the shade under the bridge, where a throng of people had gathered to avoid the fierce heat.

The bus conductor shook his head in obvious agitation at the poisonous fumes spewing from the stranded bus, and he blew his whistle. The disgruntled passengers crowded around him, not knowing what had been decided regarding their travel plans.

“The bus is broken and can’t be fixed now,” the bus conductor announced to the passengers, who stood mopping their sweaty brows with their turbans and veils. “Buses will come and go with more frequency as the day goes on. You can board one or catch a tonga if you don’t have far to go.”

A series of rebukes emerged from the crowd before it gradually dispersed. I walked alongside a group of women toward the end of the bridge and back onto the Grand Trunk
Highway. A few buses stopped to let some of the stranded passengers board, but others walked on, hoping to hire tongas or bullock carts traveling on dirt roads to remote villages like Tobay.

My eyes were already smarting from the dust and the blinding heat, and my throat was parched. I peered ahead as a bullock cart turned from a dirt road, some distance from where I walked. It was the place where Aasif had taken off his black burqa, revealing his true identity. This was the place where I had turned around and started running toward the tonga until Nazo said I should stop running like a shameless girl without my veil on, because now there was no turning back.

“Fifty rupees each for four people to ride to Tobay,” a man’s raspy voice sounded from behind me. “But no more than five people can ride.”

The group of four women and an elderly man stepped inside the carriage. Having been lost in my thoughts, I had strayed from the group and began walking alone.

“I will give you one hundred rupees,” I pleaded, as the passengers gawked at me. “I need to get to Tobay. I’ll give you one hundred and fifty.”

The driver, a hunched-up man with a long hooked nose that stuck out like the beak of a vulture, stared at me, then nodded. I climbed into the carriage, sitting at the passengers’ feet, my legs dangling down, almost touching the ground.

As soon as we neared the banks of the river where men and boys washed clothes, I shouted for the driver to stop the tonga. I had to do this, because Baba had never let me do it before, saying it was dishonorable to wade in the river with boys and men bathing in it. Now under the shadowless sun, I trotted past the men and the boys, their shalwars ballooning in the water and lowered my body, veil and all, to taste the water of the Jhelumn River. It tasted like mud, and I spat it out. But, I had tasted it all the same.
“Get out of there. Go to where the women are washing clothes.” A man’s disgruntled voice sounded to my left. “This is no place for you.”

Emerging from the water, I wrung my veil out, wrapped it around me, and climbed into the carriage. One of the women kicked me as I sat at their feet, but I didn’t care. A younger woman who sat by the two older passengers uncovered her face, revealing a broken-toothed smile wrapped around it; then, catching the icy glare of the women beside her, she quickly covered her face again. I hoped the two angry women wouldn’t kick me out of the carriage. An explanation for my shameless behavior was in order.

“I have a jinn, and he tells me what to do,” I explained, trying to maintain a serious tone. I remembered how frightened I had been of telling anyone about the jinn in case they beat me with a bamboo stick, and I bled to death. “I’m going to Tobay so that Mullah Ishmail can beat the evil being out of me with a bamboo stick to restore my honor and my sanity.” I smiled. I didn’t live in Tobay anymore, and if Mullah Ishmail threatened to hit me with a bamboo stick, I wouldn’t be scared to run away.

“My daughter Azza has a jinn inside her,” one of the women spoke from behind her face covering. “He makes her want to play cricket with boys. She threw away her veil and cut her hair.”

“Send her with this crazy girl to see Mullah Ishmail,” a second woman, the one who had kicked me earlier, told her companion. “No shame this one has, getting wet with men watching her from all sides. And the way she was smiling and talking about the jinn, he must still be inside of her. That was him smiling.”

I didn’t care what they said about me, because up ahead I could see the marketplace with the streets cut deep by narrow bullock cart wheels. Light glittered off water pooled in the
numberless basins made by horse tracks. The marketplace trailed off into a broad field of cornstalks, their leaves brown at the tips and edges. Pumpkins and squash lay bright on the ground between the rows of corn. Amma and I had walked through these fields on our daily trip to the stream. How would she greet me now, after all these years? I wished Bibi was there with me. He had missed the sugarcane fields and the pomegranate trees. He had told me how he wished to be buried in Tobay, next to his mother.

Evening was coming on, and the light was thin and slanting as the tonga came to a halt by the small, dome-shaped mosque just as the call for the late-afternoon aasr prayer sounded from the loudspeaker. Strangers’ eyes studied me as I stepped down, my body perspiring beneath the damp clothes. Lowering my gaze, I took a deep pull into my lungs and walked along the dirt road, unsure of what lay in store.

I slogged along with my head down. What if Amma had really gone mad? What if Baba blamed me for everything and thrashed me until I died? What if my cousin Manda came charging down the road, spraying me with bullets from his Kalashnikov? I hastened my footsteps and turned to glance behind me, hoping no one was following me. Ahead, the cluster of mud houses lining the old dirt road came in full view. I stopped in my tracks, inhaling the sweet, dusty air of Tobay. Kneeling down, my hands touched the parched soil beneath my feet. The ground darkened as my tears fell, drop by drop, into the dirt.

Turning the corner, I walked past the old peepal tree, stopping outside the old wooden door to my house. I hesitated before finally knocking. When no one answered, I knocked again. At the third knock, an eye appeared at a crack between boards, the latch lifted, and the door opened. A woman’s hand gripped the doorframe. The thumb was missing, and two fingers were conjoined. The nails were painted a bright red.
Was that my Amma’s hand? No, she wouldn’t have painted her nails red.

“Jawad Farid, my father, lives here.” My voice felt as though it didn’t belong to me. It felt as though someone else was speaking those words, and I was merely an onlooker, surveying the scene.

She gasped, shutting the door in my face. If this was Amma, wouldn’t she just have flung the door open and wrapped me in her arms? Maybe she had really gone mad and didn’t recognize me anymore. Maybe she thought I was back from the dead. Maybe she never wanted to see me again. Just wished I was dead.

I stood dazed, too afraid to knock again.

The door slowly opened for the second time, but this time the woman faced me, her face covered in a white, stained veil. Her eyes held mine for a long time. “Mina.”

She stepped aside. I felt her eyes follow me as I entered my courtyard. Ma-ji’s familiar sagging rope-strung charpai lay to the side. There was no hookah placed beside it. I felt like I had returned from the dead, stepped into another time zone, one that existed years and years ago in which I had been a little girl and had a family to call my own until a jinn scooped me away in a chariot and took me to the dark underworld.

I felt like turning around and running away. I wished somebody, a passerby, would tell me I had knocked on the wrong door. This wasn’t my house, he would say. Mine was down the street where Baba and Amma and Grandma Ma-ji still waited for me. And Dhaaga? Oh, Dhaaga, he would say. Dhaaga just took Bindi for a ride, and they should be back soon enough.

The woman motioned for me to sit on the charpai. She sat next to me, her eyes fixed on my face. I lowered my gaze to her feet that were blistered from heel to toe in tight, red bubbles of skin.
“You don’t recognize me,” she muttered from behind her face covering. “You were always so innocent, just like Bindi.”

I peered at her, still dazed. Then, coming to my senses, I rushed toward the rooms hoping to find Amma or Baba or Ma-ji. Was this woman a jinni? Had there really been a jinn in the pomegranate tree, and had he sent her here to haunt our house because Dhaaga and I had dishonored his abode by lying under it shamelessly? The villagers had been right all along. She must have killed my family and now lay waiting to kill me. She must have known I would return.

“You still look so innocent.” Her hoarse voice sounded from behind. “You don’t even know who I am. I live here alone.”

I turned around and reluctantly stepped back into the courtyard. That voice intimidated me, as if beneath her face covering, she was laughing at me, mocking me for being stupid enough to have come back after all these years and expected things to be just as they were before I left. How did she know my name? Maybe it was Amma!

“You told me all those stories of Dhaaga. Who knew one day I would meet him and he would take care of me and bring me back to Tobay to live in this house again?”

I knew then that this had to be the woman who had visited Dhaaga at the shelter, the one that Huma had asked me about. So this was Dhaaga’s wife! She was the woman who had stolen Dhaaga from me, the way Nazo had stolen Baba from Amma all those years ago. Now she was living in my house as Dhaaga’s wife! If she was here, where was my family? Where was Dhaaga?

As if reading my thoughts, she slowly lifted her veil from her face and stood facing me.

“Never thought you would see Nazo again, huh?”
“Nazo.” I choked on her name. “Nazo,” I repeated, staring at her disfigured face with layers of scorched skin overlapping each other. Her nose was completely flattened with two holes like open sewage pipes in Heera Mandi. Her hair was in patches. The whites of her eyes appeared startling against the rawness of her skin. She reminded me of the girl I had seen in the tent, the one that Safia said had tried to leave Heera Mandi. Jhanda had thrown acid on her face.

“Aasif did this to me.” She went to sit on the charpai, burying her face in her veil.

“Oh, Nazo!” I didn’t know what to say or how to feel in that instant. I had always imagined her living in Lahore as Aasif’s wife with children to call her own. Who would have thought that the next time we would meet would be in Tobay in my house with Nazo looking the way she did! I wanted to believe that karma had caught up with Nazo, and she was being punished for what she had done to me. Then I thought of the night I had seen that girl with acid thrown on her face, when Safia told me if I didn’t do as Jhanda the pimp told me to, I would suffer the same fate. I thought about how if I hadn’t listened to her, who knew what Jhanda might have done to me? I might have been standing here instead of Nazo, looking the way she did. I would always despise Nazo, but I could never dare to believe that anyone, no matter what they had done, deserved this.

“Aasif accused me of having an affair with this man whose house I cleaned.” She turned her face away, her voice reduced to a muffled whisper. “That man promised he would marry me and buy me a big house in Lahore, and me, the fool, I believed him. Oh, Mina, look what happened!”

“So you had an affair with him, just for the sake of getting a house?” Nazo had managed to ruin another family.
In a muted tone she told me that once they left me in Data Darbar, Aasif looked for odd jobs and found work as a driver for this rich family. They offered to let them stay in the servant’s quarter and also offered Nazo the job of a maid in their house. She said she had always dreamed of living in a big bungalow and having servants all around her. She would see the man’s wife sitting in the back seat of the car while Aasif drove her around and wished she could be in her shoes. She knew, as hard as he tried, Aasif could never offer her what she wanted. He would always be the driver driving other men’s rich wives. “I wanted to be one of those women,” Nazo said, spit dribbling down her chin as she wiped it away with her charred, lacquered finger. “I thought I could trap him to fall for me. Don’t ask me how, but Aasif found out.” He confronted her one night, she said, and the rest was history. She didn’t want to go into any more details, and I let her rest. After a while, she seemed ready to talk again.

“How did you meet Dhaaga? And my Baba and Amma, where are they?”

“I can’t talk so fast.” Nazo spoke so softly now that I could barely hear her. “Dhaaga brought in a child with severe burns when I was at Mayo Hospital receiving my own treatments. The name Dhaaga is so unusual. Who else would be named after a piece of string?” A faint odd-sounding laugh escaped from her ruined lips. “I asked him where he was from, and he said he was from Jalalpur Sharif, but that he had also lived in Tobay for a while.” She watched me through blood-veined eyes, observing my reaction. “I mentioned your name and told him I had met you at Data Darbar. I didn’t tell him who I was.” Spit dribbled from the side of her mouth again, and she wiped it with her veil. Dhaaga, she said, told her how he had met me in Lahore. “I thought you must have told him about how I had tricked you into leaving Tobay. I think I told him I lost you in Data Darbar…. I can’t talk any more, Mina. My voice chokes up….” She hobbled toward the kitchen, returning with a glass of water.
“Dhaaga just took pity on you and didn’t strangle you for what you did to me because you’re… all burnt up!” I retorted. “His mother burned herself, and that’s why he wants to help you. I can’t believe you told him you had just lost me in Data Darbar, Nazo! How could you lie to him?”

“Your Baba and Amma left Tobay shortly after you and I… and Aasif… left.” She spoke as if she hadn’t heard me, as if it didn’t matter anymore what she had or hadn’t said to Dhaaga. “The villagers said Manda threatened your Baba if he didn’t find you and bring you back.” She lifted her glass and drank some water, then choked and coughed and drank some more. “The whole village was laughing at Manda, saying his fiancé had run away so that she wouldn’t have to marry him. Your Baba knew even if he found you, Manda would have you killed to save his family’s honor. Your Baba pleaded with him.” She wet her fingers in the glass, dabbing them gently over her scorched, flattened nose. “He said he didn’t know where you had gone to, but Manda wouldn’t hear any of it. Your Baba packed his things, and he and your mother tried to run away on the Tez Gam train. Manda chased them down as they jumped on the train when it slowed down near Tobay… Water, bring me more water.”

I hurried to the kitchen to fetch water before she felt too tired to speak anymore. The kitchen was dark and dingy with rat droppings strewn across the floor. An earthenware jug lay near a corner, covered with black cobwebs. Amma’s steel glass that she always kept in the corner window still lay there. I held the dusty glass in my hand for a moment. Then I placed it just where she had left it. I poured water into a mug lying by the earthenware jug and brought it to Nazo. She took small sips and waited before she spoke again.
“Manda chased the train on his horse, like a madman, the villagers said. He tried to stop the train. They found his body by the railroad tracks.” She traced her two conjoined fingers over the glass. “Him and his horse mangled on the railroad tracks.”

“And Baba and Amma?” My voice quavered. “They escaped?”

“No one has heard from them. Leave them be, Mina, wherever they are.” Her hand trembled, causing the water to splatter on the charpai. “Even if you saw them again, what story will you tell your Amma and Baba? They said your Amma was already crazy. She ripped her hair out, stared at nothing for days, saying that her Mina was innocent. The jinn from the pomegranate tree, she told the villagers, had taken you away, because Manda said someone had seen you and Dhaaga coming back from the bend in the stream with the pomegranate tree.”

“And Grandma-Ma-ji?” My tears flowed freely now.

“She lives with your uncle, Manda’s father.”

“At least I can see her.”

“You think you’ll be welcomed at Manda’s house?” She rubbed her fingers over her cracked lips. Drops of blood oozed from the lower one.

“You can tell Ma-ji I didn’t run away…. Tell her, Nazo.” I gripped her thin shoulders.

“What difference does it make now what I say?” She pushed me away. “Manda’s dead.”

“You’re not scared to live alone?”

“I finally told Dhaaga who I really was. He was so angry at me for what I did to you, but after a while, he said being burned was punishment enough for me.” She paused. “Dhaaga said your Baba was a good man, and he might take pity on me, even take me back. After all, I was still married to him. But, when we returned we found the house empty and a lock on the door.
I’m still your Baba’s wife. This house is mine. Dhaaga comes now and then, brings food, and
takes care of me.”

“Where is Dhaaga now?” My voice still quavered, but I stopped making an effort to
control it. At least he hadn’t married Nazo.

“He works in the city somewhere.” Her eyes began to water. “If you wait here a few
days, he might pay a visit. Stay here, Mina. I get lonely all by myself. I can’t beg you to forgive
me. How can you after all I did to you? You must hate me. You must think I deserve all of this.”

I couldn’t bring myself to even think of staying under the same roof as Nazo. This was
not about forgiveness. It was beyond that. Forgiveness wouldn’t bring my family back. It
wouldn’t undo the wrong that had been done. Forgiveness wouldn’t help me. It wouldn’t erase
my memories of begging on the streets, of being a cheap whore, of blackening Baba’s name.
Forgiveness wouldn’t even help her. It wouldn’t restore her face and make her into who she was.

I couldn’t stay, but I also couldn’t go. Huma said even though time had elapsed, and the
Chaudhry’s son would have given up searching for me, it was still better I stayed away from
Lahore for both Huma’s sake and my own. I knew I couldn’t go back to Heera Mandi or even
dare to contact Aunty Minnie, in case she informed Jhanda. God only knew what he would do.
Going back to America was out of the question, because Haris was in jail now, and I was
connected to him in every way. I couldn’t think too clearly, but I knew the only safe place for me
for the time being was Tobay. Besides, it was the only place where I had a chance of seeing
Dhaaga again. I would put up with Nazo for that one reason. I had heard enough for one day. I
stood up from the charpai and walked to the back of the house. Nazo had said Bindi was still
there. I hoped with all my heart that Nazo wasn’t lying.
Bindi lay with her legs folded under the old peepal tree. The white mark on her forehead confirmed that it was my Bindi. I ran over and hugged her fat belly, crying out her name. She roused up, stiff in her joints. Her big black eyes stared at me, not blinking.

“Bindi,” I whispered in her ears, “you waited for me. I know you did. You knew I’d come home one day. Dhaaga must take care of you every time he visits. Oh Bindi, I wish you could talk. You must have heard Amma and Baba plan their escape from Tobay, from Manda, all because of me. Who knows where they went to?”

I rested my head against Bindi’s belly, feeling the heat rise from the ground around her. I must have fallen asleep, because when I awoke, a half-moon stood high in the sky. My eyes focused past the fields to the slopes of the mountains that were visible only as a faint smudge of darkness.

“I have lentils for you to eat.” Nazo stood watching me. “You can sleep in your grandma’s room.”

I lifted my head, rubbing my eyes. “I’ll have the lentils, but I’ll sleep next to Bindi tonight. I’ll take her to the stream tomorrow. She must miss bathing in the water.”

“Dhaaga takes her there every time he visits.” She choked on her words. “Keeps going to that pomegranate tree by the stream. He said some of the villagers have seen him going there and have tried to stop him but he doesn’t care.”

“What do the villagers say?”

“They’re furious at him. They said if he disturbs the haunt of the jinns, they’ll set the whole village of Tobay on fire.”

Nazo left the lentils for me to eat and took hobbled steps back into the courtyard. I leaned against the mud wall listening to the high lonesome cry of a jackal far off in the mountains.
Splotches of moonlight revealed an endless stretch of sugarcane and wheat fields, and beyond them lay the muddy stream. At the far end of the stream was where the forbidden pomegranate tree was. I wished I could be with Dhaaga under that tree just once more.
When I awoke the next morning, the first gray light of dawn began gathering faintly, and as the light built, the mountains in the distance began to form themselves. I walked over to the courtyard and found Nazo sitting on Ma-ji’s charpai, her acid-scorched face uncovered, as if a jinni from my dreams had come to life. I remembered the time she had sat there as my Baba’s bride, the day after their marriage, waiting for the village women to meet her. I hadn’t known at the time how miserable she had been in that moment. How she must have sat there, wishing Aasif would whisk her away.

“But Dhaaga might be visiting soon,” Nazo said as I joined her on the charpai. “God knows what I’d do without him coming to see me.”

“Why don’t you just go live in some woman’s shelter in Lahore, instead of having Dhaaga come all the way here for you?”

“Because my home is right here,” she said, with a look of disdain. “I’m still married to your Baba even if I don’t know where he is. Just think, where else would I go? Why don’t we both just live here? It gets so lonely for me.” Her fingers grazed the back of my hand. “Tell me about you, Mina. I’ve told you everything I know. You tell me about yourself.” She lowered her gaze. “Dhaaga said things about Heera Mandi.”

“Like what?” I swiveled my head in her direction.

“Just that some pimp forced you to dance and work there.”

“What else did Dhaaga say?”
“Ask him yourself when he gets here.” She said in a quiet tone. “Still can’t imagine you dancing in Heera Mandi. What’d you do? The Kattakh? I always wanted to have someone teach me that.”

I couldn’t believe with all her physical disabilities she wanted to talk to me about dancing. That morning, as I watched her apply butter to her burnt hands, I thought of the times she had sat by her dresser applying make up, even coaxing me into putting some lipstick on, even though Amma had forbidden me from using make up until I was married to Manda. Even though I would always hate her, a part of me couldn’t help but admire her for having enough spunk left in her to apply nail polish to those scorched hands, for wanting to know how whores danced in Heera Mandi, for choosing to live alone in her condition. The truth was, setting everything else aside, Nazo still had that spirit in her. I felt it every time I sat next to her. But, that spirit was exactly what had landed her in trouble in the first place. Lucky were the women who stayed obedient in mind and body. The rest of us just made a mess of our lives. If any obedient women like Amma got in the way, we messed up their lives, too.

“Stop staring at me, Mina,” Nazo’s voice dragged me back from my thoughts. “I don’t need to be reminded of the way I look!”

“I didn’t mean to stare at you,” I said in a quiet tone. “I was just thinking of the nights you’d be after me to put lipstick on and all that rouge, and I’d say I couldn’t because Amma would kill me. Then I’d do it anyway, so you wouldn’t get angry.”

“Stop blaming me for everything,” she said, sighing deeply. “You enjoyed putting that make-up on. It wasn’t like I would’ve killed you if you hadn’t. You have that messy part in you, Mina, even though you think you’re all good, and everybody just makes you do bad things! I mean how many girls living in Tobay would ever do what you did with Dhaaga and Heera
Mandi—” I was grateful when she started coughing and choking on her words. As much as I hated to admit it, maybe Nazo was right. Maybe I was more like her than I cared to admit. A truly good woman would have done what Dhaaga’s mother had, set herself on fire rather than live a dishonorable life in the red light district. If the Chaudhry hadn’t been the man who had murdered Dhaaga’s family, I might even have lived on as his mistress. At least by refusing to go with the Chaudhry, I had stayed true to my love for Dhaaga. No, I wasn’t like her in every way. I had never tricked anybody, the way she’d tricked me. I wasn’t good, but she was worse.

“I was so in love with Aasif when I was forced to marry your Baba,” her voice sounded in my ears. “That’s all I could think of in Tobay. I was just counting the days left for him to come and get me.” She smiled to herself. “I thought we’d get to Lahore, and he’d get a job, and then I’d have everything I ever wanted. Who knew all of this would happen?” She swallowed hard and asked for water. I brought her some and waited before she spoke again. “I know the mistakes I’ve made, but I can’t help but think of all the women who do what I did, who want everything I wanted. They get to marry those rich men and lead the life I wanted, and God lets them. Why’d he choose to punish me? Why not punish every woman who runs after money? Why just me?”

I didn’t know what to say to that. Why does God choose to punish some of us while others are let free? Nazo wanted to undo her past just as much as I wanted to undo mine, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“Nazo,” I said, “we can’t figure out life even if we try to. We’ve both made mistakes. Just leave it at that.”

“Who knew I’d be asking you to teach me dancing, and that, too, in Tobay!” She managed a wide smile, but it cracked her lower lip, prompting blood to ooze out.
“I wore this pink *ghagra* the last time I danced,” I said, a wheezy feeling in the pit of my stomach as the blood from her lip trickled down her chin.

“Wait.” She limped to her bedroom. “Dhaaga brought back a veil a few months ago when he went to visit that old transvestite, your friend. What was his name? Bibi? It has all these dried-out mud-stains on it, but who cares?”

“Dhaaga went to meet Bibi?” I raised my eyebrows.

“He never got to meet him, he said.”

“What are you saying?”

Emerging from the bedroom, she held out the veil. “This is what he got from the transvestite brothel. Some transvestite gave it to Dhaaga, saying Bibi had kept this in your memory.”

I gazed at the stained pink organza veil, my eyes clouded with memories of dancing in front of the Chaudhry, of being sold in slavery, of the veil slipping from my shoulders and falling into the muddy puddle. Bibi had retrieved it, saying he would keep it in memory of our last meeting, and he had. He hadn’t even washed the mud stains off, just kept it the way I had handed it to him.

“This was the veil that came with the *ghagra*.” I shuddered, thinking how the Chaudhry’s *goondas* had ripped it off my body.

“The veil has its own story.” Her voice became a hoarse whisper again. “Dhaaga said Bibi was found strangled with this veil around his neck.” Nazo stopped. “He said there was nothing anybody could have done. People at the brothel said it was the Chaudhry’s men.”

I felt as if the same veil was tied around my neck and was choking me. I collapsed to my knees, wishing I had never met Bibi, so he could have lived on. Huma was right when she told
me that the Chaudhry’s son must have found out about Bibi visiting me in prison and helping me get out. Now I knew for certain I was the reason Bibi had been murdered.

    “Why care so much for an old transvestite, anyway?” she said casually.

    How dare she talk about Bibi in that way! I wanted to grab Nazo by her burnt, wrinkled throat and shut her up for good. “Don’t ever talk about Bibi like that—ever.” Snatching the veil from her, I ran toward the back of the house to be with Bindi, my only friend. I collapsed to the ground next to her and cried until no more tears came. Images of Bibi being strangled with my veil would haunt me until the day I died.

    I stayed on in Tobay, trying to maintain some kind of a focus on what I should plan on doing for the rest of my life while I waited for Dhaaga. A part of me didn’t want to see him again. After my conversations with Nazo, I wondered if I was right to even think of being a part of his life when I had strayed so much. Would he even believe me if I told him that with all that went on in Heera Mandi and my sham marriage to Haris, all I ever wanted, all I ever dreamed of, was to be with him? Didn’t he know I never wanted to run away from Tobay, and that once I was gone, all I did was hope and pray that I would see him again? Did he know how scared I had been after seeing the acid-burnt face of that girl in the tent? That was why I had succumbed my body to the devil and worked for Jhanda. No, I wasn’t brave like Dhaaga’s mother. I wanted to live. Could Dhaaga ever understand that? Couldn’t my love for him be enough of a reason to be with him? Couldn’t he just take me the way I was? Who else did he have but me?

    I slept in Dhaaga’s old room, feeling close to him as I lay on the old wicker mat, dreaming of him lying next to me. There were nights when I lay awake listening to the rain pelting the tin roof and thought of how Dhaaga had said it sounded like the villagers were
throwing stones at him. I thought of Amma giving birth to me in that very room, her screams muffled by the veil in her mouth, so the villagers wouldn’t hear her pain. I thought of the window Amma said the angels had made for me to be squeezed through. I wished there really was a window in that room now, and the angels could squeeze me out of it. I would fly to where Amma was and never leave her again.

I lay awake listening to the roar of the Tez-Gam as it slowed near Tobay, blowing smoke through its stack, and I thought of Dhaaga riding Bindi and jumping on the train, his blood-soaked body reeking of pain. I wished with all my heart that on one of those nights the train would bring my Dhaaga back to me.

As the days dragged on, I almost gave up any hope of seeing Dhaaga again. Maybe Nazo had lied, and Dhaaga never really visited her. I might even have left, but I knew I really couldn’t go anywhere. So I stayed on. I spent my days cleaning and sweeping the house, milking Bindi, washing her, feeding her, and talking to her. That brought a sense of peace I hadn’t experienced in a long time. Bindi was my connection to the past, those carefree days when Dhaaga and I spent our days pretending he was King Sikander riding Bindi, his black stallion, while I was Rosanna, his Persian princess, walking by his side. Those were the days I dreaded hearing Amma or Ma-ji’s voice calling for me because I couldn’t bear to leave Dhaaga, my king. How I wished I could hear Amma’s voice again. The sweet voice of my mother calling my name, wondering where I was.

Nazo stayed asleep most of the time, or nursed her body, trying to ease her pain and discomfort. The vegetable-hawker brought vegetables in the morning, and one time, one of the village women called on her. I stayed away, knowing it would cause a scene if they knew that Baba Farid’s disgraced daughter was back in Tobay. There were days when Nazo and I sat on the
charpai with stories to tell. I didn’t care what she wanted to know. Nothing really mattered, now. It even felt good venting out, sharing my sordid past with someone like Nazo, who had never had any morals to begin with. I talked to her about my days in prison and she listened, even let out a muffled cry when I told her stories about the inmates. She had endless questions about America. I felt like I was Haris and she was me, and I was showing her another world.

There were days when I peeked out the door, wishing I might see Amma or Baba carrying their clothes on their backs, rushing to meet me. I decided several times to see Ma-jii, but I knew I would never be let into Manda’s house. I was the reason he was dead. I was the reason that whole family’s face was blackened.

It was on the eve of the nineteenth day of my stay in Tobay that the unexpected happened. I was putting away the iron cauldron we used to cook our lentils in, when the muezzin’s call for the sunset prayer sounded on the loudspeaker. It was the announcement that was made for all of Tobay to hear, and it left me in complete shock. The Chief Minister of Punjab would honor us with his presence in four days, enroute to his ancestral village of Jalalpur Sharif. His presence there would mark the second death anniversary of his martyred father, Chaudhry Asim Baig.

I was left in shock. Four days from then, the Chaudhry’s son would be in Tobay. It seemed as though my past would never leave me. What if somebody knew I was here and somehow they caught me? I thought I was safe in Tobay. As long as I remained within the four walls of my house, I would remain hidden. For a moment, all I could think of was that my miserable fate had landed me here in Tobay. This was God’s way of telling me that I was safe nowhere.
“That’s the Chaudhry you and Dhaaga keep talking about,” Nazo voice sounded from the courtyard. “Can you imagine he’s coming here?”

“Maybe I should just leave,” I said, a feeling of doom hovering over me. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Don’t be silly,” Nazo interjected. “No one knows you’re here.”

“God knows what all’s been going on since I left. Maybe they know everything: where I lived, that I’m back.”

“Mina, no one knows you’re here.”

“What if they come here to check the house? Maybe somebody will tip them about where I lived. Don’t you understand? The Chaudhrys live in another world. A world I will never understand, only fear. From the day I was born, all I heard from Amma was that as long as I stayed within the four walls of my house, I would be safe from the Chaudhry’s goons.”

“If you’re so scared, hide somewhere for the time that minister’s here. I doubt he’ll stay for a long time. Probably just an hour or so. What would he want to stay on in Tobay for, anyway?”

“Where would I hide”? 

“You think of that. Honestly, I doubt after all this time, he’ll even be bothered to look for a small thing like you. They probably looked for you, and maybe someone told them you’d left the country. Silly, shouldn’t have come back!”

“Quit calling me silly! If you were all that smart, you wouldn’t have gotten yourself into your fine mess!”

Nazo managed an odd-sounding laugh. “We’re both just fools, you’re right. I’m just trying to calm you down.”
“I don’t even trust you. If the Chaudhry’s goondas came here, you’d probably tell them where I was hiding.”

“I’m not that much of a monster, Mina.” She swiveled her head in my direction.

“Besides, I like having you here. I need you, Mina. How many times do I have to say I’m sorry?”

“Where can I hide? Maybe I should just go back to Lahore and let Huma figure out where I should live.” That wouldn’t happen. I remembered Huma telling me that the Chaudhry’s goondas had paid a visit to her house while she was away. They had searched through the house much to the horror of the servants and left, saying they’d be back if they needed to. Thankfully, I was at Aunty Mary’s at the time. I knew Huma wanted me as far away as possible from her.

“I have an idea, actually two, about where you can hide if the Chaudhry’s son comes looking for you.” Nazo motioned for me to join her on the charpai.

“And?”

“First, you can go to that cab driver’s house, the one you helped and ask to stay there.”

“I’m sure he’d let me stay with his family. Forget it!”

“Second, if you just want to disappear from the house for the time that the Chaudhry’s son is in Tobay, why not go to that pomegranate tree. No one ever goes there, and they would never think of looking for you there.” She was daring me to go there. Just like her to do that. “In fact, if you’re too scared, I’ll go with you.”

I didn’t know what to think about that. The villagers really believed there was a jinn there. But, that was just the problem. Even though I didn’t believe there was a jinn there, not anymore, a part of me still felt frightened of going there. It was just one of those things, one can’t explain. Nazo would probably tag along with me. At least I wouldn’t be alone.
Maybe Nazo was right when she said that since the Chaudhry’s son was the Chief Minister now, he wouldn’t really be bothered to find out the whereabouts of the girl who had killed his father. But, fear engulfed me, and I knew once the Chaudhry’s son was here, I’d wish I had gone somewhere where he couldn’t find me. I just wanted to be as far away from him as possible.

“I have another idea!” Nazo’s said in a hoarse whisper.

“What’s that?”

“Just wear a burqa, stay hidden, and mingle with the women who’ll be outside to get a view of the Chaudhry. At least you won’t be in the house.”

Why hadn’t I thought of that? That would be the easiest thing to do, and for the first time in my life, I would see the Chaudhry’s son, Dhaaga’s mother’s rapist. But, what if my knees gave way, and I fell flat on the ground, and they removed my burqa and knew who I was? What then?

The night before the Chief Minister’s arrival, I lay in Dhaaga’s room, when I heard the front door opening and the sound of footsteps entering the courtyard. They got louder and I knew whoever it was, he was coming towards the back of the house. Was it the Chaudhry’s goondas? Had they already found out I was here?

I huddled in a corner, knowing it was too late to go running out. The door swung open, and as the moonlight filtered in, I saw a thin man with his hair sprawled across his forehead. My mind could be playing tricks on me, I thought, but after a moment I knew it was Dhaaga.

“Mina!” Dhaaga’s voice was a whisper as he stood outside the room, his eyes peering into the moonlit room. “Is that you?”
“Dhaaga!” I cried out. He stood still at first, but then rushed towards me, wrapping his arms around me, stroking my hair. I buried my face in his chest, whispering his name over and over again. *This* was Dhaaga. Dhaaga. Dhaaga. Dhaaga. “The Chaudhry’s son is coming tomorrow. Did you know?”

He pulled away from me, sighed deeply but didn’t say anything. Then as if lost in his thoughts, he spoke quietly, “I didn’t know. I only found out once I reached Tobay.”

“I’m still so scared, Dhaaga. Let’s just get out of here.” I wrapped my arms around him as we sat on the wicker mat. “We can be together now. Let’s just leave. I have a bad feeling about this.”

Dhaaga was quiet for a long time. He wrapped his arms around me, quietly stroking my hair. I wanted to ask him what he had been doing since the last time I saw him at the shelter, but I didn’t want to start what I thought would be a long conversation. I didn’t want to talk about anything else. I just wanted to be in the moment, to lie in his arms and feel safe again. I wanted to hear him say that nothing would tear us apart again. I wanted all my bad memories of the past to evaporate as I lay in his arms. I wanted to be his Mina from Tobay again.

“Let’s just go away,” I said to my love. “Take me wherever you are, and never ever leave me again.”

“That’s what I want more than anything else,” Dhaaga said in a quiet tone. “Ever since I left that day, I thought I would never see you again. I still can’t believe you’re here. How did this happen?”

Unlike the last time I had seen him at the protest, this time I had nothing to hide. I told him about my sham marriage to Haris and how I had come back from America to help Haris get
out of jail, the way he had helped me. Dhaaga listened quietly. “You were brave to come back just to help him out,” he said.

“Once they caught him, I knew they would link me to him and it was just a matter of time before the immigration authorities would come looking for me,” I answered truthfully. “So, I’m not really a hero.”

“Remember the last time we were in this room?” he said, holding me tight. “I thought I would never see you again.”

“Take me away now, Dhaaga,” I said. “I don’t want to have to see the Chaudhry’s son’s face. I don’t want to be anywhere near him. I was so scared of him, Nazo even suggested I go to the pomegranate tree and hide there until he left. She said no one would come looking for me there.”

As if on a sudden impulse, Dhaaga grabbed me by my shoulders. “Then that’s where we’re going.”

“Now?”

He started walking to where Bindi sat by the peepal tree. “Let’s take her along. In case the Chaudhry’s son gets here before we leave, at least you’ll be safe there.”

The thought of going to the place where we’d been together for the very first time seemed exciting, especially since we’d be leaving the next day. We straddled Bindi and led her toward the side trail that led to the forbidden tree. There was an eerie silence as we rode through the darkness. It seemed as though all the villagers had retired for the night in anticipation of the excitement of witnessing the Chief Minister’s arrival the next morning.

Once we approached the stream, the moonlight shone on the water, creating a shimmering light as though a ray of stars had fallen from the sky and landed in the stream. I felt
nervous just seeing that pomegranate tree, but I told myself all that talk of jinns was just sheer nonsense. The moments Dhaaga and I had spent under that tree were those that I had re-lived a million times over in my mind until they had been burned into my soul.

My love and I sat by the water’s edge, wrapped in each other’s arms. He didn’t want to talk anymore, he said, he just wanted to lie next to me, our bodies pressed together. We made love many times over under the stars just as I had imagined, but never believed it would come true one day. I told Dhaaga how I had thought at the time that I might be carrying his baby in my belly because he had lain on top of me.

“This time it might just come true,” he said, kissing my mouth. “Maybe that’s why I brought you here, to finish what we had started a long time ago.”

I traced my fingers lightly on his eyes, his nose, and his mouth. “I hope we have lots of children, Dhaaga. Yours and mine.”

“Mina,” he said, cupping my face in both of his hands. “I know you’re strong. Stronger than even you realize.”

“Why are you saying this?” His voice had sounded strange, as though he wanted to say something. “I don’t need to be strong now that you’re here.”

“I have to take care of something in the morning. I have to meet someone. You just wait here.”

“Who?”

“Just someone I owe some money,” he said, his voice seeming calm. “I’ll give him the money and then come back for you. Just wait here. Just do what I’m saying.”

I was so tired that I didn’t want to argue. When I began asking him to tell me all that he’d been doing once he left the shelter, he refused to say anything. He just kept saying he couldn’t
believe he was there with me. He kept telling me how strong and brave I was to have doused oil on the old Chaudhry. “You’re my princess, and I’ll always be your king,” he whispered in my ear. I fell asleep in his arms, feeling as though by the next morning, all my troubles would have washed away in the water.
When I awoke in the early morning hours, Dhaaga was gone. I waited for him all morning, just as he had told me to. As the morning sun rose higher in the sky, I decided to go to the house, thinking Nazo might know of his whereabouts or whom he owed money to.

“Where’s Dhaaga?” I saw Nazo in the courtyard as I entered through the back gate.

“Have you seen him?”

“He came in really early. Spent some time in his room. Then he left, maybe to join the people waiting for the Chief Minister. Why?”

I hurried to the front door, peeping outside. Men and young boys had lined up on the sides of the dirt road, anticipating the Chief Minister’s arrival. Jeeps full of turbaned gunmen, their Kalashnikovs pointing out the windows, rolled down the street amid clouds of dust. The villagers shouted and ran toward them. Behind the Jeeps, a white Land Cruiser followed, with a green flag flying on its hood.

“Sher-dil!” Men in turbans and shalwar kameezes, some in long, skirt-like dhotis, shouted hysterically. “The Lion-hearted!”

The Land Cruiser stopped abruptly outside the mosque where the villagers crowded. Women watched from the cover of their mud huts. Some gathered under the peepal tree a few houses away from the mosque. Wrapped in a black burqa, I joined the women sitting under the peepal tree. As the crowd grew around the Land Cruiser, I craned my neck to see if Dhaaga was there but couldn’t see him.

The Chief Minister, in a starched white shalwar kameez with a silver and gold sequined turban on his head, stepped out of the Land Cruiser. Armed bodyguards surrounded him on all
sides. A line of well wishers, many with garlands of roses in their hands, formed before him as he made his way toward a large padded chair that had the image of a roaring lion printed on a bright red satin cloth draped over the back of it. A fancy blue and red ceramic hookah was by his side, and he leaned back in the chair and took a few puffs. One of his bodyguards addressed the villagers who had hoped to hear the honorable Chief Minister speak.

“Chief Minister sahib has graced us with his presence today in Tobay as he visits his ancestral village of Jalalpur Sharif to observe the death anniversary of his father, the martyred Chaudhry Asim Baig. May the great leader rest in peace.”

“Ameen,” the crowd chanted in unison.

“We will take a moment and say a prayer for the martyred soul, the Chief Minister’s father, the late Senator Asim Baig, brutally burnt the night he led a campaign to shut down the brothels of Heera Mandi. May Allah rest the martyred soul, the custodian of honor and shame, and grant him eternal peace in Paradise.”

The Chief Minister raised his hands in prayer, his fingers adorned with gold rings, much like his father’s had been. The starched pleats of his silver and gold turban dazzled in the sun’s blinding light. After a few moments, the glimmering turban slid to the left side of his head, and one of the bodyguards rushed to straighten it. The villagers followed the Minister in prayer, raising their hands with their heads bent in reverence. I wondered what they would do if I told them that I was the demon who had burnt the Minister’s martyred father. Martyred soul. I felt sick just hearing the words. I said a prayer of my own, thanking God that the old goonda was dead and rotting in his grave.
Then I spotted Dhaaga. Hands dangling by his side, he stood patiently in line, waiting for a chance to shake hands with the Honorable Minister. I felt my throat go dry. Why would Dhaaga want to shake the hand of his mother’s rapist?

His turn was coming. I didn’t know what to do to stop him. I knew somehow that I had to. Something wasn’t right. Before I could do anything, I saw Dhaaga extend his hand to shake that of the minister’s.

There was a deafening roar. Something hot and powerful exploded in the mosque. The ground lurched beneath my feet, and I saw bodies flying, twisting, as chunks of burning wood and shards of glass spewed in all directions. Everything came crashing to the ground with a loud thud.

There was silence, and then the screams of women. I saw veils of all colors, red, pink, yellow, and black, as women ran from behind their mud walls and from under the peepal tree, beating their chests. Veils flew in all directions and landed in the dirt like fallen kites. All around me on the ground were bodies and pieces of bodies. So many men had come apart in the blow that the ground was slick, and there was a terrible stink from what I suddenly realize had to be their insides. Amidst the chaos, I saw a child, a barefoot, half-naked boy with his ribs sticking out, bend down and lift the blackened silver and gold turban of the Chief Minister. The boy placed the turban on his own dirty matted hair and stared blankly at the Chief Minister’s severed head, which lay in a pool of its own blood.

Walking away from the butcher shop scene, I saw Nazo standing barefoot by the door to our house, face uncovered, eyes gazing at the Jeeps, tongas, cars, motorcycles, and pedestrians that streamed toward Tobay. They would be among the first to witness and report horrific scenes of charred body parts, ripped turbans and sandals, squashed hookahs, and garlands of roses.
scattered in the shards of glass, the burnt Jeeps, a blackened Land Cruiser, and the empty muzzles of broken Kalashnikovs.

And they would wonder which political party was behind the assassination of the honorable, the lion-hearted Chief Minister of Punjab.
My princess Roshanak was born nine months after her father avenged his mother’s death. I gave birth to her in the windowless room where my mother gave birth to me all those years ago. Nazo was by my side. She had rolled the end of a veil and told me to chew on it, so the villagers wouldn’t hear my screams. She kept saying, “Chew, chew, chew,” and I chewed until I heard the first cries of the little girl I named Roshanak, for the light that she brought me.

She likes straddling Bindi and riding her, pretending she is King Sikander’s Persian princess. Bindi is old now, but as though to please our princess, she still manages to waddle to the well and back with Roshanak, as she sits perched on Bindi’s back, letting out squeals of delight. In the evening when the muezzin’s call for the evening prayer sounds from the loudspeaker over the mosque, she wants to hear stories of how her father used to ride Bindi, pretending he was King Sikander, the warrior.

I tell her she should fear no one. Her father, I say, always dreamed of going to Lahore and becoming a police officer. She says once she’s old enough, that’s what she wants to be, a police officer. Once she’s old enough to go to school, I will take her to Lahore and do what it takes to make her dreams come true.

I wish I could read her the letter that Dhaaga left in his room for me, the morning he set out to kill the Chaudhry’s son. I don’t want her to think her father was a murderer. He did what he had to. Every night, once my princess is tucked away in her bed, I read Dhaaga’s letter by the glow of the kerosene lamp. I trace my fingers over his handwriting, trying to imagine how he must have sat in this room, knowing he would never see me again, knowing that as he wrote this, I was lying under the pomegranate tree, waiting for him.
My love, my Mina,
Forgive me for leaving you when we could have been together. Forgive me, my love, or else my spirit will not rest. Once I saw my mother set herself on fire, I knew I would not rest until I saw the Chaudhry burn the way my mother did. I knew he was coming here, and that’s why I reached Tobay the night before his arrival. I couldn’t tell you anything. I couldn’t. I knew once you tried to stop me, I might weaken in spirit and not go through with my plan. I hear the Jeeps coming, Mina. I have to go, my love, my life.

Yours, Dhaaga

After all I did to save myself by entering Heera Mandi, marrying Haris, travelling across oceans and continents, knowing I might never see Dhaaga again, how could I even begin to judge Dhaaga for what he had done? How could I ever be angry with him for leaving me? I hope his spirit is at peace. I look at our princess and am grateful that a part of him breathes inside her. I took her to the stream one day, and she heard one of the mothers telling her daughter to stay away from the far bend of the stream, where the haunted pomegranate tree stands. Roshanak asked me if I’d ever been there. I told her the tree wasn’t haunted, and the next time we went to the stream, she and I could play there in the water, the way her father and I did. She’ll never know that it was under the pomegranate tree that she was conceived.
Aneela Shuja moved to the U.S. from Pakistan in 1978. She received an undergraduate degree in English from the University of New Orleans in 2005. She is a 2013 MFA candidate for Creative Fiction Writing. Her thesis is her first novel, *Under the Pomegranate Tree*, which is based in Pakistan and the U.S. Aneela has also produced a collection of short stories focused on the lives of Pakistanis living in the U.S., in Saudi Arabia, where she lived for seven years, and in her native Pakistan. Her short story “I’m Not Maria Lopez” received an award from the University of Southern Alabama and was published in an anthology of Louisiana writers, titled *Something in the Water*. Her essay “Chicken Masala” was published in *Meena Magazine*. She has also written op-eds for *The Times Picayune* and *The Clarion Herald*.

Following the 9/11 tragedy, Aneela delivered numerous lectures in various institutions, including churches, high schools, and universities, and appeared on radio talk shows in an effort to remove misconceptions regarding Islam and Muslim women. She was awarded the Role Model Award by then-Mayor of New Orleans, Ray Nagin, for her services to the city. Aneela lives in New Orleans with her husband and three children.